

## Down This River

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# Down This River

by [Interjection](#)

## Summary

As part of a political alliance with New L'Manberg, Hypixel citizen Ranboo Beloved is to be married to President Tubbo Underscore and live his new life in a nation scarred by war.

He has a few objections to this.

## Notes

you don't need to read the previous fics in this series for this. the only thing you need to know is that 1) this is a realistic-fantasy style world, so more gamey "minecraft" mechanics don't apply and people only have 1 life and 2) it's an au where after nov 16th, tommy, wilbur, phil, and techno decided to pack the fuck up and leave, not telling anyone besides tubbo (and everyone else think wilbur died in the explosions)

special thanks to Mack, Jess, Rhyley, and Crickett for betaing

# saltpeter city

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When they tell him, it was dawn. That splendor of watercolor sunlight, soft golden palettes, the glint on his spindly fingers. If he goes to recall the memory some time later, he would grasp little of the details. But one of the few he does remember, beyond the news itself which his mother drawls to him in that languid, measured tone of hers, eyes sharp - at the time, it had been dawn.

He had been seated on the balcony of their spiral residence, glass doors slid closed; a merciful barrier between him and the silent household. It's a beautiful view of sloping hills, the ocean horizon beyond. Birds were singing, flowers were blooming... while he might not have thought it at the time, later Ranboo will recall something almost heavenly about that morning.

His mother and stepfather had still been asleep at the time - like most of Hypixel's upper class, they are not in the habit of rising with the sun.

Ranboo and sleep have always had a troubled relationship, however, so that day had found him on the balcony with sunlight pouring warm down his shoulders like pleats of airy cloth. He's in a chair - green, rocking, chipped with age. A scar down its left armrest marks the day his stepfather had tried to drag it through the balcony doorway and to the trash disposal pile. Ranboo, young and frail and yet to tower above near everyone he knows, had gripped on tight and begged for its continued presence on the balcony.

He had been called many things that day. The usual - whelp, wrench, wretched creature. Bastard, too, as at the time his mother had not claimed him as a legitimate child yet. Some other accusations which stung deeper - foolish, naive, stupidly sentimental.

The rocking chair eventually stayed on the balcony, however, so Ranboo still considers the entire spectacle worth it. Especially as it is one of few pieces of furniture in the house which still seems to seat him comfortably after his sudden height growth a few years back. He savors his mornings on the chair, rolling gently back and forth to a rhythm nothing else will provide, bathed soothingly in the glow of a world and sky awakening. This dawn is no different.

There's a tiny marimba set in front of him. The keys are painted like a rainbow, bright and clear. His mother had recently gotten it for his last birthday. Most would probably scoff, shake their head incredulously at what is perceived to be a tiny child's toy, and not a gift meant for a champion of Hypixel almost brushing the snare of adulthood. His mother certainly hadn't put much thought into it - not that she is prone to do so with much of her matters, so Ranboo can't take it personally.

Her lack of forethought is what had led to his existence, after all. Very few of Hypixel's citizens would consider it wise to bed down with an enderman.

Every society also has its exceptions. His mother is one in mind, and him one in appearance; he cuts a thin and unflattering shape, tail always tucked and shoulders hunched together when he goes out in public. At least, he has gotten praise for his ability to act “proper”.

The marimba set is nice. The tones ring clearly, sweet, like bells almost vexing. Even without much planning, there is no chance someone of his parents’ caliber would interact with merchants who sold less than the finest quality of goods.

Ranboo sets down his mallets in the familiar position - tilted inward slightly more than parallel, and taps away a little tune. The family that occupies the level below has its windows shut tight, and those above - an old couple who hands him snacks and little trinkets when he passes by them sometimes - have told him they enjoy listening to his practice.

So he plays away, fluttering strikes. He starts with a few basic scales first, but they quickly dissolve into a melody he doesn’t know - one which drags his hands along with them. Improvisation - Ranboo’s not terribly great at it, but he tries and he enjoys it well enough. It’s easier when there’s no eyes judging him.

His appearance always draws additional scrutiny - that is just the way of things. It stung a little when he was younger, but by this point he’s made a determined point to ignore it - rise above it, even. At least he’s not one of those slum hybrids, where even food is a struggle to gather every day. For them there is no path to property, to public goods, to citizenship.

He plays. The notes are clear, heralding. He’s heard similar instruments referred to as bells, though he’s never quite understood why.

Dawn still lingers its yawning yellow cavern over the sky when the glass doors slide open, and his mother steps into the light. She takes one look at the small marimba, and then at Ranboo, and a faint smile crosses her face. Her husband - Ranboo’s stepfather - steps out a moment later. His expression is neutral, as it usually is nowadays.

One of them speaking brief words to him in the morning is common. Both of them, together, are not. It usually means something important - news that will change things, and not just to ask what he wants for breakfast that day.

“Ranboo.”

Ranboo blinks. “Yeah?”

“We have just received a summon from Hypixel’s Admin Council,” she says.

Well. That could be extremely good, or extremely bad. Her mother is expressionless. He tries to remember if they had been expecting something like this, but comes up blank. That’s typical. He’ll have to consult his memory book later.

“Oh. Um-” he flails for words briefly. “What for?”

His stepfather turns to stare straight into Ranboo’s eyes. Ranboo fights back a blink, or a gulp, or a subtle shift away - he’s had all his life to get used to eye contact, and for the most

part he has, but - still. Instincts so ingrained die hard.

The next words are even harder to not flinch away from, however.

“For the arrangements of your marriage.”

~\*~

Ranboo has a life. He has a life not too different from most other teenage children of Hypixel’s upper champion classes. Like most of his peers he’s passed the trials that mark him as a champion, though a bit later than usual due to his mother’s faffing back and forth about whether or not to actually claim him as her legitimate heir. Her 9th miscarriage had finally convinced her.

Sometimes, he thinks his birth might have somehow messed up her womb for the development of later, normal human children, though he knows better than to bring that up.

But the point is, Ranboo attends school, where he does decently enough in class and hangs out with his small group of friends. He strolls down market streets and feeds stray cats and browses merchandise which he occasionally buys. He watches daily tournaments and often participates as well - his leaderboard scores have been climbing recently, significantly enough that some people now draw other similarities and call him a “discount Technoblade”. He goes to harpsichord lessons on every 3rd, 11th, 19th, and 29th day of the month.

He has a life. He has friends and acquaintances and a family, however distant they might be. He has a future, one he can reasonably expect will actually be quite comfortable.

It’s strange, how quick a life can be upended so entirely.

~\*~

The office room is relatively small by admin standards. Bookshelves line both side walls. A table crowds against the back window, blooming papers and potted vines. The desk in the middle is wide enough to seat two people on either side with some room left over - it’s made of wood so polished and clean Ranboo can see clearly his own reflection.

Beside the admin is a woman - an official looking person, pressed suit and sharp appearance. But across from them, Ranboo is alone.

“Sorry for such a short notice,” the admin says. “My name is Thoron - you can call me that, or not. I don’t care. This is-”

“Niki Nihachu,” the woman says. Her voice is like the water of a summer stream - deceptively easy to be swept away in. Ranboo is immediately put on edge.

“I - um. I’m Ranboo. Ranboo Beloved,” he says, like they don’t know that already. Thoron gives him a thin smile, as if indulging in a joke Ranboo doesn’t yet understand.

“We’ll make things plain and clear here,” he says. “As you might know, the nation of L’Manberg experienced another revolution more than a month ago, to overthrow the - ah -

Schlatt Administration. It is now the nation of New L'Manberg, headed by President Tubbo Underscore. For the past few days, he and a diplomatic team has been in Crown City negotiating an alliance with Hypixel."

Ranboo nods uneasily. That word - that lurid, haunting word - *marriage*. It burns his mind even now, as it has the entire short carriage ride from his family's residence to Lobby Zero, the administrative center of Crown City and Hypixel.

"We settled on many agreements, the details of which you will know shortly. One in particular pertains to you right now - that Tubbo Underscore would secure the deal through marriage with a citizen of Hypixel."

*Marriage. Marriage, marriage.*

"Um. That's." Ranboo tangles his fingers, clinging to the way his dulled claws clack against each other. "I'm. Marriage. That's me?"

Thoron remains expressionless, the same way his stepfather tends to do so often.

"I see you're not one of the slower ones," he says. "Yes, that means you."

Ranboo slides down in his seat. It's actually a very comfortable chair, plush and smooth. His eyeline is still above Thoron's, but he feels anything but powerful here.

"I don't - why me?"

Thoron shrugs. "I wasn't part of the meeting where they sorted the candidates."

"I'm sure the other admins involved gave it much consideration," Niki Nihachu says. She looks almost sympathetic, but there is no room for argument in her tone. "Pleased to meet you, Ranboo... Beloved."

Oh no. Oh wow. They're doing the last name dance already.

"Can - can I refuse?" Ranboo says, suddenly feeling lightheaded. "I mean, I'm sure Mr. Underscore is a nice guy and all, but - um. You know. I have a school project due in 3 weeks that's 40 percent of my semester grade and there's this litter of stray kittens I've been feeding on Dante Avenue whom I'm *sure* you don't want to starve-"

"No," Thoron says flatly. "You cannot refuse."

"Oh - oh. Um. Oh."

Being part of a child marriage is not on Ranboo's list of things to do in life, but apparently, it's happening anyways.

"Would it be a surprise if I told you that from now on, there will be Hypixel guards stationed near you until after the marriage?" Thoron says, like it's not the foregone conclusion.

Niki Nihachu's face tightens. "Don't worry," she says. "New L'Manberg's weather is mild, just like Hypixel's."

Oh. So he's going to *live* with Tubbo Underscore as well. In New L'Manberg.

Through the window behind them, Ranboo sees a sky mostly clouded. The sun has long since risen out of sight.

~\*~

The marriage is to take place in 3 days. Ranboo is examined by Hypixel's best doctors, groomed over by expert hair stylists and manicurists who click disapprovingly at the sight of his teeth-worn nails.

He writes to his parents for what to pack in luggage. His mother arrives with two suitcases and his best formal clothing; it's too short a time-frame for a tailor to customize anything his size.

She had glanced at him once in that short exchange, with a frown bordering upset - and then she had disappeared through the doors. Ranboo's guards quickly blocked her from sight.

He hadn't wanted to see her terribly much anyways, but the ache still presents itself.

~\*~

Ranboo's first glimpse of Tubbo Underscore, the man who will so completely alter the entire rest of his life, is during his walk to the altar. The heads of everyone in attendance - far smaller in number than what would usually be gathered at an event like this - parts way like a veil to reveal someone considerably shorter than he is. Brown hair, dark suit.

Ranboo's first thought of Tubbo Underscore, the man who will so completely alter the entire rest of his life, is that it's actually unfair just how unremarkable he seems. While strange scars spiral his face, stark and pale like a drifting white rose, and there's a tremor to his steps Ranboo can only assume to be old wounds, beyond that there is little in the way of novelty. He certainly doesn't seem *presidential*.

His second thought, as his soon-to-be-husband turns his head to face him, is that Tubbo Underscore also looks considerably younger than he expected - a few stress-wrinkled lines, gray hairs, but overall his appearance is youthful. Which is... a plus? Not that being forced to get married when he's 17 and *had* plans for his future is great under any circumstance, but Ranboo supposes he would rather do it with someone who at least looks close to his own age.

And according to Niki, who had come to visit him in his assigned temporary room several times over the past few days to brush him up on New L'Manberg customs, the New L'Manberg delegation had played no part in choosing the marriage candidate. At the very least, Ranboo could console himself with the fact that Underscore *probably* doesn't have a thing for marrying children. He wonders if he's decent enough to, in fact, be upset by it.

The rest of the ceremony passes by in a haze. Ranboo vaguely follows the lines of speeches being said - they're short and focused more on the political consequences of their marriage than wasting time with well-wishes about their personal relationships, which is a small thing to be grateful for.

They also don't have them say vows - all that "I do" confirmation and the things that follow. The officiator declares them married at the end of all the reception without much fuss.

Ranboo supposes he might as well be grateful for that too. There's surprisingly little pretense here.

He doesn't feel very grateful. He thinks that's a warranted sentiment here.

Tubbo Underscore - and fuck, that means he's now Ranboo Underscore, not Beloved, since he's in the bride position being given away by his family and nation - holds the same expressionless gaze Ranboo's stepfather and Thoron did. Ranboo can't bring himself to even muster any anger towards it - only a mild and irritated annoyance.

There is an hour or two after the ceremony where they all sit down to have dinner - seared chicken breasts in wine-sauce, salads, fruit bowls, a dozen varieties of noodle-like pastas and dippings, and at the end of it all the wedding cake portions are passed around. Again, Ranboo finds some resentment in how good it tastes. He downs 3 slices. Might as well take advantage of the food.

He and Tubbo Underscore avoid each other's eyes the entire time, though they sit next to each other at the tables. It is as though they are in their own little bubble worlds, still clinging to that former innocence.

At least no one comes up to try and offer their congratulations. A few people briefly pass to speak with Underscore, low mutters and quick hushes, but for the most part the din of conversation comes entirely from the guests instead of the centerpieces themselves.

When the night dawns, they are escorted back to their rooms. Ranboo, to his relief, is directed back to his temporary assigned room and told he will board the ship to New L'Manberg with the nation's delegate tomorrow morning. It is a problem for future him, then, and despite everything he falls asleep with only mild head-tossing.

~\*~

The ship that will sail him away to the underworld is named *Clara*. She's a slimmer beast than what Ranboo's used to seeing, clippered sides and sails black like cloudy nights. He tunes out a shiphand's droning about revolutionary designs and eyes the plank sprawling upwards to the deck for him.

A shadow passes above. He glances up to catch the oiled glimmer of an albatross's wings. Its giant shadow drags everyone's attention away for a blissful few seconds - and then, all eyes are back on him again. He returns the gazes. A small procession of admins and other administrative figures of Hypixel are there to see him off, but his parents are nowhere to be seen. Perhaps that's a relief.



Ranboo swallows. He takes a step onto the plank. It's sturdy beneath him; there's not even a creak as he plants his other foot on the ramp as well.

That seals the deal. He proceeds towards the ship, one step and then another more, until he reaches the lip of the railing.

Ranboo is so focused on the stained wood beneath that when he finally looks up, almost but not quite about to make that final jump onto the ship deck, the sight of the offered hand catches him by surprise.

Tubbo Underscore, to his credit, seemed mildly nervous at his own offer of assistance, which Ranboo considers briefly. For the first time they meet eyes, if just a moment - Ranboo sees there in those speckled hazel pupils an innumerable darkness he hopes he will never understand.

Then the link is broken. He's not even sure who looked away first. But nevertheless, he makes the small, steep jump onto the deck; thankfully without issue. He stays away from the offered hand. It falls back to Tubbo Underscore's side without so much as a sigh.

The silence is tense, for a moment. Ranboo finds himself almost reveling in the stares. They *should* feel awkward about this.

Then he turns to Niki. "Could you show me to my room?"

Niki purses her lips, but nods. "Follow me."

When they arrive at the door, it is a tiny space with room for a small desk, a chair, shelves, and a single hammock, as apparently is customary for seaworn vessels. Something about falling out of beds too easily.

"Where's... Tubbo's room?" he asks. The name tastes strange on his tongue, like bitter fruit seeds. But he might as well get used to saying it - *Underscore* is now his last name as well.

"It's down at the other end of the hallway," Niki says.

"Oh," Ranboo says. "That's good."

Her stare burns into the back of his head. He fights down a smile.

~\*~

Ranboo avoids his new husband at dinners - though to be fair, he avoids everyone the best he can. Often he sneaks food into his room to eat.

It's on one of these nights when he's treading down the hall, back stooped down so the ceiling beams don't whack his face, hovering between stumbling and balancing two plates, that he nudges his cabin door open to find something - or rather, multiple somethings - dark, furry, and yowling horribly in his hammock.

“Why are there cats in my hammock?” he asks, but of course there is no one but the cats themselves to answer. It’s clearly a mother and her kittens - a large black shape laying beside several mewling bundles. The kittens are the ones making the racket, but the adult herself seems to hold less interest in them and more in sleeping.

Ranboo’s really not looking forward to spitting out cat hair every time he tries to take a nap himself. He sets his plates on his desk, takes a deep breath, and decides to ignore the situation by eating his dinner. He eats quickly.

Seriously. What the fuck.

~\*~

He skitters off his chair in surprise when the door slams open and an extremely frazzled looking Tubbo Underscore bursts in, panting, eyes alight with panic. His hands grip a cane tight - he looks a breeze away from collapsing.

“Are you about to start screaming too?” Ranboo asks, raising his voice over the kittens’ weakening protestations. “I really don’t need another interruption to my dinner.”

“I - uh.” Tubbo’s eyes dart between him and the cat like some soldier on watch. “I heard screaming.”

Ranboo blinks. “Yeah. That would be the cats. I didn’t think they were loud enough for you to hear though.”

“Why were there screaming cats in your hammock?”

A shrug. “There *were*. By the time I got there she’d already given birth. Now the kittens won’t quiet.”

Tubbo cringes back. He looks sorry. Ranboo hopes he is - he had been enjoying a mildly disturbing, but at least functional dinner time before he came barging in.

“Do you - do you mind if I take a look?” he asks.

Ranboo stares. “You want to poke around my sleeping space?”

“I - there’s baby cats in there! And you haven’t done anything!”

Ranboo frowns. Upon some further reflection of this, he decides - *screw it*, and resumes eating.

“What are you-”

Tubbo’s words break off as the wails begin to die down. Ranboo shoves the last of the mashed potato down his throat (what strange people they are, *mashing* their potatoes), and finally strolls over to his hammock. It’s woven wither fibers dyed a simple black, which breaks the dark, furry bundle shuddering within into a hundred indiscernible lines. But eventually, he makes out a flash of pale pink, darkened, almost blue-

There's an adult cat licking her paws almost disinterestedly. As Ranboo's shadow passes over her, she abruptly twists into a jump out of the hammock. She leaves a faint red pawprint before disappearing out into the hallway. Left behind is a litter of tiny, cold, now silent kittens.

"I'm going to need a new hammock," Ranboo says. Tubbo gives a single, jerked nod, and turns to disappear down the hallway without a word as well, just like the cat before him.

~\*~

The cat is one of the ship's few, whose purpose is to thin the persistent plague of rodents that always follow the shipping experience. Like all the ship's cats, she's female. She doesn't have a name. The father was probably some stray cat back in Hypixel.

The kittens are all dead by the time Ranboo and a disturbed shiphand bundle the hammock together and carry it up to the deck. Some were stillborn; others died from the neglect. Ranboo tosses the hammock overboard himself. Then he watches the waves quietly from a bench. The cat is curled on his lap, having made a strangely quick recovery. She licks her paw and begins grooming behind the ears, lowly rumbling. The only part of her body not black, besides roughened gray paw pads and claws of a similar caliber, are the pair of bright emerald eyes which stare like beacons into his own.

She had remained as disinterested as ever throughout the whole ordeal. Ranboo pets her head absentmindedly.

"You're a real special one, aren't you?" he breathes. "I think I'll call you Enderchest."

Enderchest sleeps in the next replacement hammock he gets. She doesn't make a mess.

~\*~

He still doesn't talk to Tubbo, who doesn't try entering his room again.

~\*~

A week later they make landfall in the outer port of New L'Manberg, piers and warehouses threading the rocky shores in their solemn stances. It's a small gulf, threaded by the largest river Ranboo's ever seen - not that he's seen very many rivers. Despite their ship being easily able to fit down the river, if with some difficulty for having to go against the current, they still unboard and usher into much smaller vessels.

Ranboo breaks his silence to ask Niki why. She blinks, shakes her head, and sighs. "It's - it's hard to explain. You'll see."

Enderchest is curled in his arms, eyes blinking wide, as they sail up the river. The water's currents are weak.

He has heard of L'Manberg - the city, not the country that once shared its namesake. Almost everyone has. The city of the walls, the commercial heartland city. It is beautiful, they say. It

is old, it is foundational, it has glorious marble columns and terraced roofs of silver and aqueducts spanning the lengths of legendary serpents.

It is... an utter wreck. The boat glides not into another pier off the side of the river, but instead the river itself widens into a *lake*.

A lake not like any Ranboo has ever seen before, that's for sure. It looks as if an explosion of unspeakable magnitude had torn through the foundations of the city... itself...

"Oh," he says.

The City of L'Manberg is now a city above a lake. But it is hardly a city at all - around the distant shores he can barely see through the gloom, there are tents and wood lean-tos and whatever shelter it seems broken furniture and cloth can create. Masses of people huddle in lines reaching towards giant cauldrons of soup, attended to by cooks and several guards each.

There are only a few proper buildings - some remain on rubble islands peaking above the ashen lake. Solitary pieces. A few step hesitantly from the shores, wooden stilts and platforms. From even here, just approaching from the mouth of the river, it's easy to see when someone plunges themselves into the lake, waves hissing under sunlight like splashes of black diamond dust, ripples fading quickly after the body disappears - and doesn't resurface.

Wilbur Soot sure was determined to create a legacy.

~\*~

The City of L'Manberg, capital of New L'Manberg, was once a city that built itself around the river that carved through it. The explosions had left the water to fill its empty craters, creating a lake full of sharp corners and debris.

In the middle of the lake is an island - an island larger than the rest, anyhow. It's raised higher too. There's the ruined corpse of an old marble building upon it. Most of the left side is completely decimated; as they pass, Ranboo sees three workers hauling slabs of a dusty marble from the island into the lake.

The right side is mostly intact, save for a few dangerously large holes cracking through the walls and a corner. The ivy crawling up the sides are the color of muddied ink. When Ranboo departs off the boat and onto the island, again without support, the grass beneath crumbles like fine gravel.

"The White House reconstruction is a work in progress," Tubbo says, stepping down beside him. They both turn to stare at the door, just a few short steps away. It's spruce; unpolished, uncarved. A plain wooden rectangle. There's no path to it - only more brittle grass. Enderchest paws the grass, little delicate taps, as though nervous.

"We've got a few rooms that we're relatively sure won't collapse on us in our sleep, though!" Tubbo suddenly adds with a rare brightening smile. He nudges Ranboo forward.

It's a light touch, barely grazing, a knuckle on his shoulder.

Ranboo slides away. He fixes Tubbo with a short frown before stalking over to the door. Tubbo's reaction is lost behind him.

Niki escorts him to his "room." This time, it's right beside Tubbo's. There's a dozen other rooms in the sheltered section of the White House, wood walls barriering them from the desolation outside. Insulation.

"Fundy's room is across from yours," Niki says, nodding towards the "nameplate". It's a yellowed piece of parchment, nailed to the door. *Fundy*, it says.

"Just Fundy?" he asks. No title, no addition.

Niki hesitates. "His full name's Fundy Soot. But we'd all rather you just call him Fundy."

Fundy *Soot*. There's a story there.

The phantom brush of Tubbo's hand burns him once more. A drag of ashen webbing layers over his shoulders, advancing forth steadily. Uncompromisingly.

He turns and opens his room. It's small, smaller than his room back in his parents' house, all the way back in Hypixel hundreds of miles south. There's a bed. A shelf. A desk. A chair. A coat hanger. A small white rug, circular.

Enderchest brushes past his leg and curls herself onto the rug. That's settled, then - it's officially a cat bed. Ranboo's never stepping foot on it.

A bloom of affection warms his heart. At least he has someone who will support him, however tangentially.

He turns back to Niki. "So... is no one worried about mold? Or leaks?"

The structural integrity of this hasty "White House," patched from old marble and withered wood - even if it might not collapse on them *immediately*...

"We're working on it," Niki says, looking almost apologetic. "We have to secure food and shelter for the civilians first, though, before it looks like we're living too comfortably. Tubbo's position as president is dubious at best. If people feel like he's abusing it, it wouldn't be hard to stage another coup."

Great. Another way he might die miserably here.

"I guess I'll... get myself settled," he says finally. He has two suitcases of luggage, which apparently someone is bringing over to him later. Those contain clothes, toiletries, books, card games, a few personal trinkets, and a small stash of dried fruits and sweets that will apparently be more valuable than he anticipated.

"Right. I'll leave you to it, then," Niki says. "Luggage will be here in a few minutes."

Ranboo sits down on the mattress. It's a dark red, and smells of pungent poppy dye. Must have been recently bleached through.

"Thanks," he says.

~\*~

His suitcases arrive, carried by some man with a tattered blue beanie. He speaks quick words Ranboo doesn't hear. His head is cloudy, his limbs aching. His vision flutters in swirls of black and white.

The man's accent sounds different from Tubbo and Niki, though. It's more similar to the words of those ship crew members. Native L'Manbergian, maybe? He does recall something about Tubbo being a foreigner here as well.

He catches the man's name as he leaves. Connor. How strange.

"Do you think I should unpack?" Ranboo wonders aloud to Enderchest. She twists in his lap and meows. "Yeah, I guess it would be silly not to. But I don't *want* to, you know? And technically I *don't* have to. Wouldn't it be nice to do something only *I* want to do?"

A batting paw snags against his dress shirt's buttons.

"You're right," Ranboo sighs. "It would be silly to protest like this. I'll have a better time later if I unpack now."

Is this a sign that he's going crazy already? Making up responses from his cat?

"But you're a special little girl, aren't you?" he whispers, scratching her ears absentmindedly. "Just don't give birth on my bed again, okay?"

An assenting purr.

With another sigh, Ranboo slides her off his lap and onto the newly made blankets. Then, he sits down on the cold floor and unlatches the first of the suitcases.

~\*~

For four days, Ranboo stays in his room, reluctant to even peek his head. There's not a window to stare out either - though, given what little he's seen of the building's outside, he doubts any bedroom has them. Niki knocks intermittently and delivers bowls of soup with a ladle.

He thinks he might be fine sulking with Enderchest for the rest of his life. But on the fourth day, there's a knock on his door, and when he answers it's not Niki on the other side.

"Hi," Tubbo says, hands behind his back. His gaze stares into the cold stone flooring, which makes him look even smaller than he already is in relation to Ranboo. "Um - you should come help us today. Rebuild the pier."

Ranboo blinks. “What pier?”

“A pier. That was destroyed by the withers. We’re rebuilding it today with some of the civilians.”

A nervous glance at Enderchest.

Ranboo takes a step back. “Do I have to?”

“Yes,” Tubbo says frankly. “You’ve had four days to settle. Sorry if it’s not enough, but everyone is working non-stop around here to rebuild the city. If you’re living here, you have to pitch in.”

“*If I’m living here.* I wonder whose idea that was.”

Tubbo winces, but his shoulders square firm. “We must all play the hand we’re dealt, unfortunately. You’re coming to the construction, or I’m dragging you there personally - and that wouldn’t be good for your publicity.”

Ranboo is tempted to make a scathing comment about his “publicity,” but it could very well be the difference between life and death here. Especially if Tubbo gets caught by a coup anytime soon - a likelier prospect than he first realized.

“Fine,” he says. “Do I bring anything?”

Tubbo shakes his head.

Enderchest follows them, tail lashing back and forth when they step into a shaft of weak sunlight. Tubbo looks up, sighs, and leads the way to the door.

The outside is the same as it was before, though the ground sinks damp with the smell of old rain. It’s a cold, miserable looking island Ranboo finds himself turning to face as he settles into the canoe, Enderchest a warm weight on his lap. Tubbo takes up the paddle and begins rowing them away.

He could kill Tubbo right now, Ranboo realizes. Lunge forth, shove the President of New L’Manberg overboard, hold him under from his perch on the canoe. Watch the bubbles slowly fade into quiet ripples, and then nothing at all. He knows he has the strength, the speed.

Though Tubbo hasn’t necessarily done anything terrible to him yet, it doesn’t erase the fact that he would be rid of the chains of this marriage. Just like that. The idea is so tempting Ranboo finds his fingers twitching forth.

Tubbo isn’t even looking at him. His gaze is turned, firmly, on the distant lake shore where a dozen people are crowded around some logs sunk vertically in the water.

It would be so easy.

“We won’t be doing this too much.”

Ranboo stiffens.

“This is firstly a public show. To let the civilians know we’re willing to get down and dirty to do the hard labor with them too. It builds more respect. You, as my new - uh, spouse - should also be here. So they have a good first impression of you. Before any unwanted rumors start circulating.”

Unwanted rumors. Ranboo’s grip on the canoe’s edge tightens.

“Ender hybrids are less common around here, but we’re used to seeing lots of different people. I don’t think there will be *too* many challenges about you being a hybrid,” Tubbo continues. “If there is, let me handle it for now. I still have to introduce you to the administration people, but I figured the pier-building would be something a little less different. You’re used to physical labor on Hypixel, right?”

Ranboo eyes a group of workers erecting the wall of a house on a platform raised nearby dubiously. They’re all haggard, hair twisted and clothes wet and muddied, each with grim scowls as they haul thin wood with their thin arms and thin cheeks. There’s the occasional glance into the planks below, maybe fear that the structure might abruptly collapse and dunk them all into the near-lethal waters below.

“Not this kind of labor,” he says.

Tubbo doesn’t look too different, he realizes. Out of formal clothing and into a pair of loose leather pants and short-sleeved short, stained work boots-

Ranboo is the outlier here for more reasons than one.

They eventually arrive at the pier they’re supposed to be helping build. The canoe parks by a concession of other canoes, lined one by one against the lapping shores of the lake. Unlike several other areas, this shore looks natural. A small gravel border separates land from water. Enderchest jumps into the damp ground and scurries off to sniff at the various debris awash on the shore; wood, dead plants, chunks of stone, soggy pamphlets, and so much debris of destroyed homes. Wheels, dolls, books, glasses. All gray-washed, dead, spotted with black flecks.

Ranboo’s never seen a wither before. He hopes he never will.

Tubbo greets a woman who appears to be directing most of the movements. Everyone else has briefly stopped to stare at them - most at *Ranboo*. Everyone stopping their construction, their rebuilding, their goals, even if for just a few minutes - to *stare at Ranboo*.

Ranboo stares back into his boots, tunes out their conversation, and tries to imagine being asleep. His hands begin shaking.

He’s jolted back by a shake of his shoulder. Turning to Tubbo, he frowns.

“There’s piles of logs over there,” Tubbo says, nodding towards said respective pile a few lengths away. Someone is rolling one away. When they’re far enough, they drag up a saw and



begin cutting lengthwise. “We’ll be sawing more planks for them.”

Before he even sees where it came from, a saw is shoved into Ranboo’s hands. Beneath dozens of whispers, he has no choice but to follow Tubbo to the logs, even as another giant wheel cart of them is emptied into the pile.

Sawing wood, as it turns out, is an absolutely miserable endeavor. Ranboo has to take a break within half an hour, trying to shake some feeling back into his numbing hands. Tubbo glances at him during this, looking almost puzzled.

By the end of three hours, Ranboo’s hands are burning. Blisters tear through skin, and he has to grit his teeth against every hiss of pain. It is only that non-stop enclosure of eyes and whispers and judgement forcing him on, a cage that presses his lungs ever tighter with every new pause.

They’re watching. They’re watching. *They’re watching.* Everyone is watching. The world is watching. His life is under watch, being watched, and *they’re watching.*

His teeth chatter minutely. His hands shake. He cuts himself once or twice, and presses the fingers against his cotton shirt - it seems like such a luxury here, a clean and whole piece of clothing. Is that his fault? Is that a basis for accusation? *Is that why they’re watching him?*

A thousand eyes, watching, and Ranboo can never respond to them all, only one or two or three and then he has to go back to sawing. They play and judge and converse and judge some more.

He wishes he had thrown Tubbo off the canoe. He wishes he had taken the paddle afterwards and rowed out to sea and let the waves carry him to wherever - the ocean depths, maybe. The eyes there don’t judge.

“That’s noon,” Tubbo suddenly says. He looks tired. Ranboo’s come to realize he has some old wound which affects his ability to move easily - he wonders how he’s continuing even after everything. “I have a meeting in an hour I have to get ready for, so we’ll go back now.” He straightens his hunch and glances around. The shadowed eyes melt away, most of them. Not all, never all - will Ranboo never not have eyes on his back again?

Dimly, he’s aware of how every inch of his hands are covered in sawdust. They infiltrate his cuts, his blisters, they burn-

“Are you alright?” Tubbo asks, and though his hand hovers he does not touch. Ranboo wouldn’t have let him anyways.

“I-” Ranboo swallows. His throat burns. For some reason, he wonders where Enderchest is. “I’m fine.”

He can't blame her for not being here.

Enderchest joins them as they board back into the canoe. Tubbo takes up the oars. His hands look the same as before, if a little redder.

How long has Tubbo been doing such tasks?

~\*~

When they arrive back at the White House, Ranboo is directed to the washing area. It's an enclosed marble room - strangely enough, it has the appearance of a swimming pool room. The roof is what architects call "open," a generous euphemism for nonexistent. The center is taken up by a large rectangular hole, a length or so deep, half-filled with sloshing water. A fox hybrid is currently chasing a large, squawking crow away from the water - it eventually flies back up through the open ceiling, disappearing from sight.

"Oh!" The fox hybrid turns as Ranboo enters the room. "Hi. You're, uh, Tubbo's new..."

"I'm Ranboo," he edges in, not bothering to censor his annoyance.

"Right, sorry. Ranboo." Fundy looks him up and down - Ranboo does take some pleasure from the way he has to crane his head up to meet his eyes.

"You know Tubbo's your age, right?"

Ranboo whips his head down. "What?"

"He's like... a month or so younger than you?"

"That's - okay. Cool."

There's a moment of silence before Fundy seems to realize where they are.

"Um - you're here to..."

"Wash my hands."

Fundy laughs, for some reason. "Yeah, cool. We can... we can arrange that."

He grabs a bucket - from rows of buckets, Ranboo realizes, some half-full with water. All chipped edges and rusted handles, sides furrowed with black and green stains.

"Try to make this a one-time thing, okay?" he says. "I know the lake's not too pleasant right now, but we gotta conserve drinkable water."

Ranboo frowns. "The lake is full of wither particles."

A dismissive wave. "It's only really that harmful if it gets into your body. Skin's enough to..."

He frowns as Ranboo dunks his hands in with teeth gritted, and the old blood that crusts his cuts swirl into the pallid waters.

Washing is never fun. It's not too painful if he doesn't stay in the water long, but it's safe to say he'll always find the action awfully unpleasant. There's no soap nearby either, and given the state of things he'd hazard a guess that it's also in limited supply.

"Has anyone kneeled over from infection yet?" he asks. "This is not a very sanitary set-up."

"Some people," the fox hybrid says, which is not reassuring in the slightest. "This is the best we can do right now. You should be grateful we're not bunking on the battlefield."

Ranboo doesn't feel particularly grateful. Maybe he just needs to try a little harder.

...Nope. Everything is still centered around that simmering resentment.

With a quick final scrub, he flings his hands out of the water and staggers back.

"I'm going back to my room, if anyone asks where I am," he says. He turns to leave.

"My name's Fundy, by the way!" the fox hybrid calls. "Thank you *so* much too!"

"Cool, Fundy *Soot*," Ranboo shoots back. He lingers just in time to see an expression of shocked fury overcome Fundy's expression; and then, the walls divide them out of each other's sight.

When he slips back into his room, Enderchest is sprawled on the bed. He changes into nightclothes, leaving his previous sweat-stained, dust-ridden outfit crumpled in a far corner. Then, he crawls into the bed beside her.

A single foggy glass-gated lamp lights the dim room. Ranboo's not sure he wants windows, at this point. He takes his memory book from the nightstand and begins writing final notes. This takes only a few minutes. Then he snaps the book shut and sets it back onto the nightstand.

"Night, Enderchest," he says before blowing out the fire. The world is doused in darkness. It's not total; light filters in tiny beams through the door cracks, the wood wall. And it's not silent; the rush of footsteps in the hallway, the distant shout of workers far outside, still rebuilding.

But for now, it's his darkness. No one else's. Eyes can not see through it. Ranboo lets himself enjoy its thin curtain as he slips into the realm of sleep.

~\*~

When he wakes, he lights the lamp with a match and blearily stumbles up. Enderchest echoes a *mrrow* of protest as she slips off his stomach and tumbles into the blankets.

His memory book is on his nightstand. He takes it off, flips to the most recent pages, and reads through.

"I think," Ranboo says aloud when he's done, "now's a good day to read a book."

He has brought a small collection with him - some are old memory books, but most are novels. He picks up something simple, trivial - a collection of short stories. A volume. He begins reading.

He makes it not even half-way when the door knocks.

Ranboo ignores it. It knocks again.

“Ranboo!” Tubbo shouts. “You in there?”

“The answer is yes,” Fundy’s voice chimes in. “I can smell him. And his cat.”

Ranboo continues his silence. He flips a page.

“Ranboo, we have to introduce you to the other administration members today,” Tubbo says. “Get dressed and come out.”

Another flip of the page. The Grecians had strange mythologies.

“Ranboo, we’re not keeping this up forever. I’ll force this door down myself if I have to.”

“Tubbo, maybe you should leave him be-” that’s Niki.

“No, he’s gotta pull his weight around here,” Fundy says. “Rich boy got torn from his rich lifestyle, boo-hoo. No, he can handle some introductions. He’ll have to handle worse eventually.”

Ranboo snaps his book shut. He nudges Enderchest off his lap. He slides off the bed.

He doesn’t want to answer the door. That is the obvious idea; if he answers, he would be playing into their normalcy. He would be accepting everything that has been binding him so unfairly to this terrifying new life where unknown dangers lurk at every turn. He would be saying, *ah yes, I certainly will not put up any resistance. Tell me what to do some more, New L’Manberg. I would be totally willing to comply to the best of my ability!*

To the best of his ability.

Like a slave. A fucking slave, shipped off like a bargained price and still with his head bowed, accepting.

He can imagine it already, so much, like he has already imagined. He’ll meet whatever cursed body of legislature make the non-enforceable laws around here - to every one he’ll nod his head meekly, trying his best to avoid eye contact, still in his now wrinkled suit and dress pants, and he’ll commit everything they say to memory through his strainer of a mind and smile like a figurehead prince with a dictator’s sword still pressed cold and thin behind his rope-burned neck.

He can be small. He can be pliant. He can be whatever they want him to be - the saddled political insurance, but they might as well make *some* use of him, right? What use is there, but as another pawn in this sputtering political system?

If there is revolution, if the civilians tire of Tubbo's string-taut attempts to keep everything together, stumbling through mistake after mistake - as the foreign bride in a foreign land, Ranboo will be the first to have his head laid on the chopping block. If those political opponents of Tubbo - members of the legislature - former allies of Schlatt, maybe, who seem to hate him, given what Niki's said - if they want to worm their way into Tubbo somehow, plant a parasite seed, breath the spores of infection - they'll target Ranboo.

Naive, young, presumably stupid Ranboo, who can barely grasp what's going in this complex, ever-shifting change of alliances. And he can lie down and take it all, like he is expected to.

He can try to play the game too. He can twist their words against them, blend his body taut into the shadows, use his own abilities to slip by, or flaunt his status and weave webs around the legislature. Endear himself to the populace. He's not great at the game, but he's spent his whole life watching his parents play it. If push comes to shove, he thinks he can learn. He knows desperation does strange and often powerful things to people.

And of course, he'll report nearly every move back to Tubbo - if not for New L'Manberg's safety, then his own. He knows Tubbo is his strongest ally here, by virtue of circumstance. It's in his best interests to keep Ranboo safe, because that would keep Hypixel in assurance with their alliance, would keep his public image high and confident and secure, and this circumstance is more reassuring than any promise Tubbo could possibly make him.

But.

*But.*

This is not the kind of life Ranboo wants to be trapped in for the rest of his days.

He wants to run free. He wants to spar with his friends back in Hypixel. He wants to go fruit-picking in the bountiful autumn orchards and skim the vibrant markets every day for trinkets to collect or foods to try. He wants to play his marimba in peace and watch the sunrise dawn shine into his bedroom every day.

He wants to go to sleep without a knife beneath his pillow, rest undisturbed by fear of assassins or attack. He wants to live without sharks prowling at his heels for any sign of injury, for blood.

They're always so hungry for blood. That's one thing Ranboo has learned, observing Hypixel's upper class politics. But not every champion had to participate in those. They had the money, the resources - they could distance themselves from the center vortexes of power.

There is no escape here.

"Ranboo!" Tubbo shouts.

If he steps outside that door - he can't. He can't, he can't let them take this away from him too, take away his life, his personhood, his happy future, all his hopes and dreams-

*But what else can he do?*

The door looms dark, menacing. A plain wooden rectangle should not hold so much terror for him, and even as Ranboo tries to focus it melds into the sea of planks he's sawed, is sawing, one of many, one of an endless line of demand after demand...

Enderchest hisses in protest as the door is again pounded against.

Ranboo doesn't have the high ground - he feels like he doesn't even have any ground, but he can't think like that. To think like that is to give up already.

And Ranboo refuses to give up.

The room is so small, he realizes. It's a box; it traps him in. There are no windows. There is only that strange and mocking door.

With rattling breath, he stumbles off the bed. Drags himself to the door - when did he put his slippers on?

"If that door falls off its hinges, you're replacing it." Ranboo puts on his best approximation of a scowl as he yanks it open. Then he hastily steps back as Tubbo torpedoes into the floor with a yelp, evidently having been in the middle of throwing his body against the wood.

"Finally," Fundy says, narrowing his eyes. "What took you so long?"

Ranboo stares just above the Vice President's eyebrow. "I was trying to get my beauty sleep."

"Seriously?" Tubbo asks, pulling himself up. "I can't - you - you're joking."

Ranboo turns to level his gaze at him. He takes some pride in the height difference, however petty it is.

"What's so important you have to drag me out at this hour again?" he asks, realizing that given how little they know each other, Tubbo genuinely has no idea whether or not Ranboo was joking. He knows nothing about Ranboo at all - they're strangers, and will probably remain so for the foreseeable future.

"You're meeting the legislature," Tubbo says, above Fundy's incredulous "it's 11 in the morning!"

Oh. So he slept through the whole day and well into the next. The exhaustion must have really gotten to him.

That's not ideal. Ranboo needs time - time to write, to think, to come up with entertainment so he doesn't go crazy, to whisper reassurances to Enderchest and himself that he can still turn his situation around.

He hopes hours of physical labor a day won't become a common thing. Tubbo is the president - that means he's spending far more time in his office or with other politicians, right?

“Right,” Ranboo says, trying to draw another deep breath without much attention. “So. Lead the way.”

Fundy blinks. “You’re wearing pink shorts. And slippers. And whatever kind of abomination of a shirt that is, and your hair’s a mess-”

“You were just yelling at me to come out a minute ago,” Ranboo cuts in, deepening his scowl. A vindictive flash courses through him as Tubbo and Fundy pass glances of uncertainty.

“You should get dressed in formal clothing,” Tubbo says finally. “We’ll be back in ten minutes. *Then* you’ll meet the legislature.”

Ranboo rolls his eyes. “Great. Ten more minutes of nap time for me.”

He closes the door. Through the wood, he can hear Tubbo sigh and Fundy grumble something indistinguishable.

Enderchest meows from his bed, bushy tail flickering back and forth, splashing waves of shadow on the pale gray wall.

“You’re right,” Ranboo whispers, walking over to stroke her behind the ears. “They should be glad I didn’t slam that stupid door in their faces.”

~\*~

Ten minutes later there is a knock at his door, as expected. Ranboo opens to find Tubbo and Fundy waiting, as they were before.

“Weird choice of ‘formal clothing’,” Fundy says.

Ranboo has replaced his slippers with a pair of normal leather shoes, and also switched into plain dark pants and a white, starchy dress shirt with black polka dots.

“I’m running out of suits,” he says, shrugging. Fundy and Tubbo exchange glances again, but then Tubbo shrugs and steps back.

“Come on,” he says. “The next session begins in two minutes.”

The White House, Ranboo realizes as he follows Tubbo and Fundy through several twisting, half-crumbled hallways, is a lot bigger than he realized. There are obviously sections completely gone, sections half-destroyed and in the process of being rebuilt by various workers, and sections deemed “safe” enough for human habitation.

Everything is a mess - dust clings to crooked paintings no one has bothered to clean, there is furniture in the randomest of places and sometimes bunched up and shoved against a wall, and the material of the walls and floors themselves range from pale marble to dark stone to thumping wood. Lamps line the walls irregularly, sometimes barely lit enough to see.

Fundy stops once, to chat briefly with a passing construction worker about the state of a particular hallway section. They receive word that it'll be stable tomorrow.

Eventually, everything opens up to a larger hallway, and then through an engraved doorway and into a large chamber of a room with dozens of seats and desks in a semicircle, all fixated around a desk and two seats at the very center. The walls are painted dark blue and white, in irregular patterns like clouds reflected in a cold winter ocean. Flags of New L'Manberg hang in banners through them, lanterns dangled in between. Flags hang from the desks as well, blue and white, and red and black, smudged yellows. Dangling from the top is a massive chandelier, whose light sparkles like a diamond under scrutiny - that is to say, not at all.

It's solem, it's grave. Not just in the design of the room - the people in the seats themselves are slumped, or ragged, or look like they'd rather be anywhere else. The gloom permeates through Ranboo's skin, and he fights a shudder. Despite New L'Manberg's climate being perportatly around the same temperature range as Hypixel's, it certainly hasn't felt like it.

Around half the seats are occupied. They go down to the central middle seats, and Fundy sits down in one like the place of an adresser to a congregation. Tubbo's place must be in the other beside him- president and vice president, facing the entirety of New L'Manberg's representation.

"You'll sit with the scribe today," Tubbo says, nodding towards two seats Ranboo hadn't noticed in the very back corner of the room, on a raised level from everything else. Unlike the other chairs, these ones have plush red cushions. In one of them is a small young woman with a scowl on her face even stronger than Ranboo's, notepad and quill in her hand, inkpot on the marble stand beside her.

"After we're done with the session, you'll stay behind with Tubbo and be introduced to the most important people," Fundy adds.

"And what exactly happens at a session?" Ranboo asks.

Fundy snorts. Tubbo shoots him a warning look.

"You're about to find out," he says to Ranboo, taking his own seat. "Now go, before we're delayed more."

The implication shouldn't hurt, but it still stirs something unpleasant within Ranboo. He gives Tubbo one last frown, this time with a special dose of displeasure, before climbing the raised dias steps to the chair at the very edge of the room.

"Hi," the scribe says as he sits down. "All you need to do is be quiet and let me do my job."

It's dismissive - a clearer sign than any before that his status holds no respect in this place, but instead a cold wariness that he had no business carrying.

Ranboo doesn't bother with a response.



What the “legislature” does, as it turns out, is argue. A lot. Ranboo resists the urge to bang his head as the topic of import taxes is brought up for what feels like the hundredth time. He succeeds, but just barely, and at the cost of his frayed cuff buttons.

Oops. Looks like he’ll have to get them resown. Or do it himself - not that he knows how to sew, but he could probably figure it out? It doesn’t look that hard.

Tubbo and Fundy both sound like they know what they’re talking about. Ranboo tries to pay attention at first - he really does. Considering these are the people who will decide how the entire rest of his life will go, given his luck, he should know their basic stance on things. How to appease them, or at least offend them, and best case scenario, how to ruin their political careers if they might decide Ranboo looks good beneath a chopping block. Or any other unsavory place.

There’s arguments about food shortages (Ranboo’s used to 3 meals a day and however many snacks he wants. He hopes that doesn’t change). There’s arguments about lack of building material (does that mean he won’t have to do all that labor again? That would be great). There’s arguments about the Dream SMP’s troops gathering at their borders (not great, he hopes he doesn’t die from an invading army). There’s arguments about internal rebellions (not Ranboo’s problem, or of his interest in the slightest, unless they try to kill or kidnap him). And throughout it all it’s *wither, wither, wither-*

Ranboo wonders how much just *being* in New L’Manberg has decreased his lifespan.

At least no one’s suggested something as stupid as trying to hunt down Technoblade yet - or even worse, asking *Ranboo* to help hunt down Technoblade. If even half the rumors surrounding his achievements in Hypixel are true...

His attention drifts, his back aches from hunching over in the tiny chair, but eventually Ranboo blinks as his name is called and he’s forced to glance down to see Tubbo’s beckoning hand gesture. The scribe beside him is gone. With a mild grumble, Ranboo unbends his thin frame with more than a few cracking bones. Did he really fall asleep? Or has he forgotten again?

Fundy is nowhere to be seen either, and the population of the hollow chamber seems halved. Tubbo is talking to a man clad in red and gold, precious leather dyed almost glittering.

He looks important, like an official from the foot of thrones, overseeing, assessing, his eyes like obsidian with just a hint of curse. The red-jeweled earring pendulums back and forth with his movements, the tempo of a poker game dance. The dust and drag of their common country - the scratchy debris, the bitter weather, the waters of ruin - has managed to thinly marr but not stifle the brilliance of his display.

At first glance, he commands far more respect than someone of Tubbo’s composure, young and small and innocently wary, and who clutches the titles of authority with a pallid forcefulness like it’ll save his life.

As Ranboo’s attention on them sharpens, the feeling returns; the man’s eyes swivel ever so slightly to prick him sharp in the back of his mind. Ranboo frowns back, before quickly

rearranging his expression to something more neutral. The man is greater than Tubbo, brighter; Ranboo has the sudden feeling that he'll be forced to play with the fire.

He keeps his steps slow, measured, as he descends the diases of the chamber. It strikes him fully then how strange the room's design is - he's only seen similar geometry for choirs, but what country built at the constant edge of ruin needs a choir so voluminous? The White House was designed after the first revolution.

"This is him, Sir Quackity," Tubbo says, nodding towards Ranboo as he downs the final step to stand with them, the three in a triangular buffeted occasionally by the few people still remaining as well, like flakes of ash in the corner of Ranboo's vision.

"Ah. The nation's new husband." Quackity manages to pull off sounding oily, scratchy, and smug as fucking hell all at the same time; the shine of his long-feather coat dulls abruptly.

"*My* new husband," Tubbo says, now looking a bit testy. It's a similar expression to the one he wore when Ranboo had ignored Enderchest's kittens in his hammock, which in hindsight was not that long ago. Ranboo could probably get used to this expression.

He does rather want to sock both of his current "conversationalists" somewhere unpleasant, though.

"Ah yes, yours and the nation's. For what is the president but the heart and soul of the country?" Quackity winks, eyes glittering. "So, Ranboo-"

"First Lady Ranboo, *Sir* Quackity," Ranboo interrupts before Tubbo can. The aforementioned president makes a choked noise, clearly surprised.

He continues, forcing the silence short. "It's a... pleasure."

"Oh, indeed," Quackity says, followed by a short laugh that rakes cold glitter down Ranboo's spine. "Well then, dear First Lady. As the President says, the name's Quackity. You could say I am a coalition leader of sorts in the Parliament Chamber - it's all very complex business we attend to every day."

"Sure," Ranboo says. "Of course."

Quackity has an odd sort of quality to him, something neither wholly kind or cruel or even dangerous, but like a snake in the darkness of tall grass; waiting, watching, whispering implications. Tubbo looks faintly annoyed now - a quality which Ranboo thinks, for some reason he can't pin, undersells their current situation.

Just as Tubbo begins the syllable to some other trite, Ranboo coughs, loud and just slightly drawn out. "And I'm sure all this business is something you're... very eager to be attending to. Please don't let me slow you down - I know I'm - Uh. Very clumsy with how things are done around here."

Quackity blinks once, twice, eyes wider, though the biggest thing Ranboo focuses on is how Tubbo really has no right to look as shocked as he does.

“I’m sure you’ll learn quick, First Lady Ranboo,” he says finally, twisting his lower body like a dancer as he glides a step to the left while still somehow fixing those inexplicable obsidian beads upon him. His mouth is a quirked smile. “After all, the rest of us did.”

~\*~

After Quackity disappeared through the doors, Ranboo is only given a slight nudge of warning before Tubbo’s pushing him towards another man lingering at the chamber’s edge. He lounges by the door, chatting with Niki, who seems to bid her goodbye when she sees them coming.

“Hbomb,” Tubbo says as they approach, this time much more warmly.

“Ah, hello Tubbo,” Hbomb says. “And you must be Ranboo, right?”

“Y-yeah,” Ranboo says, suddenly feeling, for some reason, much more self-conscious. “Um...”

“As Tubbo’s already said, I’m Hbomb. Pleasure to meet you.”

“A pleasure too,” Ranboo says. He’s more than fine with staying silent here, but Hbomb then presses on.

“So, how’re you findin’ New L’Manberg?”

How is he finding New L’Manberg? As terrible as he expected, not that he’s about to say that to either Tubbo or Hbomb’s faces.

“Cold,” Ranboo finally settles on, after Tubbo’s expression has turned from curious to uncomfortable. “Restless.”

“That’s - ah. Interesting!” Hbomb’s grin doesn’t falter. “If you need some help, don’t hesitate to ask me, ‘kay?”

“Oh. Sure.” Ranboo’s shoulders can’t stiffen more, however much he wishes otherwise.

“How did you convince the guards to let you in the chamber?” Tubbo suddenly asks, switching to something more amused on his face, though it looks a little forced. “Only Members of Parliament and approved officials are allowed in the White House.”

“The guards - oh, Julia. We’re old acquaintances from the revolution.” Hbomb yawns. “Anyway, I wanted to check on you again, Tubbo. Especially with - uh, Tommy would have wanted someone to make sure you weren’t running yourself into the ground. Lake.”

“I do feel like taking a permanent dive into the lake sometimes,” Tubbo sighs.

Ranboo should feel worse than he does, hearing this, but it stirs some pity and little else. Maybe the tiniest sprinkling of sympathy with wither-dust sauce.

“Yeah - like I said. Tommy would have-”

Tubbo's eyes suddenly harden. "Tommy knew what I was getting myself into. I respect his decision and he respects mine."

Hbomb returns the sigh. He furrows the fur collar of his long coat - black and starched, pressed, strangely clean. "Yeah. But it doesn't hurt to be a little more careful sometimes in general."

Ranboo senses that this conversation's gone beyond the scope of what he should be involved in, and he doesn't particularly care for it either.

Unfortunately, he can't just leave. For... reasons.

The guards outside. Tubbo beside him. The people still whispering. The days stretching endlessly beyond him. He is historic; they are history.

"I know, I know," Tubbo says, glancing at Ranboo. "I'll be... careful. We're making progress - that's what matters. Progress. The city looks better every day."

"Let's hope that progress keeps up." Hbomb pauses. He glances at Ranboo too, just briefly. "Any help you want, Tubbo, just ask. You know my reach is broader than your Cabinet's."

"Yeah, yeah." Tubbo says. He gives a small smile. "Don't worry, we'll be in contact."

"Alright, then. I've got to go, but you know how it works. Bye!"

With that, Hbomb is out of sight. Another player through the doors.

Tubbo introduces Ranboo to a few more people after that. A regional governor or parliament member, an occasional department head. They watch Ranboo with eyes ranging from dismissive to intrigued to sympathetic, but he doesn't miss the coiled snake behind each intention.

Politicians without plans, he's realized very quickly, don't last long. Especially not through revolutions, civil wars, and large-scale societal upheaval. The question is whether he wants to become a politician. The question is whether he'll have to choose. The question is when he'll choose.

The conversations drag by like dead reeds through water. Ranboo barely pays attention towards the end. There are coordinators, managers, coming and going. Tubbo chats with some and introduces Ranboo to a few he doesn't care for. He can't say he cared much for Quackity or Hbomb either, but at least they had the benefit of being first.

He's outside in the hallway. There's a painting in front of him. It frames a man - crisped business suit, glinting eyes like emeralds. Something sharp in the smile - sharp and ambitious. The look of a man who knows what he wants and knows how he'll obtain it. *President Johnathan Schlatt*, the plaque below reads. He looks every bit the president Tubbo isn't.

And yet he's dead. Buried six feet below his own hubris, according to everyone Ranboo's heard the story from. Sharp? Not when dulled by liquor and laziness. Ambitious? Maybe; but

ambition without awareness is folly only.

Tubbo is not here. Ranboo doesn't remember why. He doesn't remember being here. That's not surprising, really, but in a place like this his conditional amnesia could become fatal very, very quickly.

That's not good. He slips his memory book from his blazer pocket - thankfully, it's still there, and so is his quill and inkpot. With hands practiced to not shake, Ranboo scribbles his daily reminders.

*Met some politicians. Quackity is sus. So is Hbomb, but slightly less. Hbomb has some connection to the Dream Kingdom? Quackity is Tubbo's political rival or something. He looks more dangerous than Tubbo. Met more politicians. Blanked out and woke up in the hallway outside the parliament chamber, in front of J. Schlatt's painting.*

"A writer? The arrival? Ranboo is here earlier than I thought."

Ranboo nearly drops the inkpot. With a quick finger to steady it back on his cradled arm, he hastily screws the lid back on and slips it, the quill, and his memory book back into his pocket.

"Who are you?" he demands, twisting his head up. The "who" in question has the standard business attire of the decision-makers around here - pressed suit, dress pants, flame tie. His eyes have a hypnotic quality to them - as if Ranboo could spiral infinitely into their abyss of lives. Despite his natural aversion to eye contact, he finds it hard to break away, like some terrible drug has overtaken him...

No, what is he *doing*? Ranboo wrenches his eyes away from those magnets and carefully stands his ground.

"Hm? I'm Karl Jacobs." Karl Jacobs makes a low bow, almost kneeling to the floor before rising back up with a strange and silent gracefulness so unbefitting of the war-sundered New L'Manberg, Ranboo has to double-check to make sure they're still in the not-so-White House. Karl Jacobs then continues. "It's good to see you again, Ranboo."

"I have never met you in my life," Ranboo says flatly.

A blink. "But you have now."

Fucking gods, Ranboo wishes the people around here would talk like normal human beings for once.

"Time loops itself, anyways. I will see you soon, just as I will see Schlatt and Soot soon."

Ranboo frowns.

"Schlatt and Soot are both dead."

"Perhaps to you. And that's the truth here - that Schlatt is dead. And Wilbur Soot is... otherwise incapacitated." Karl smiles. "It's a matter of perspective."

Ranboo's too tired for this. "Well, that's so terribly helpful to me. Thanks a lot." He moves for his room, but a quick step has Karl blocking his way again.

"Do you know why they still keep those paintings here?" he asks.

Ranboo looks back again. One far side of the wall the paintings hang from is wood beams and hastily-nailed planks, and the other far side is a slightly-better put together version of the same situation. The planks that now make up the wall are a half-finished paint job, a hurricane of dusty white slashed through once or twice, presumably because even white paint is now in short supply.

But the small section of the hallway the paintings hang directly on, strike their twin gazes from, is clearly pure marble; polished, regal, smooth to the touch like a lightened beacon of shining color arched over the depressing corridor. A remnant of the Old White House which survived the withers; a white rose of the night.

"When Wilbur became president, he commissioned his portrait with money from the state treasury. When Schlatt became president, he tossed Wilbur's in some dark closet and replaced it with his own. Following November 16th, you'd think New L'Manberg would want to throw them both into the lake." Karl Jacobs' smile lessens slightly. "It was Niki's idea to keep them. Schlatt's had survived the withers and bombs - there was enough space to hang Wilbur's right next to him. It's now a reminder to everyone who passes that they are not above the consequences of their mistakes. This way, you will always have the weight of this nation's history upon you."

"Well, *I'm* not shouldering this nation's weight," Ranboo says, barely bothering to hide his scoff. This Karl Jacobs, it seems, isn't part of New L'Manberg's government, and likely isn't qualified to be here either. Between him and Hbomb, Ranboo wonders if the salaries of the guards could be considered unnecessary spending.

"Not now, maybe. Or maybe you don't feel it yet." Karl Jacobs pauses. "It's quite interesting, though, how quickly the environment seeps into the person."

"Is this another lecture about how I should accept responsibility? Tubbo and Fundy have given me enough of that."

"Not really. I-" Karl Jacobs coughs. "Sorry. Sometimes I don't talk like myself. But what I mean is, as strong as you are, you're still only one person. Maybe it's best to try a different approach for the cards you've been dealt."

Try something new, he says, like Ranboo has anything worthwhile to try. Run away? To where? Accept his situation, accumulate power? Maybe. He's practically half-way there. He doesn't know, really.

At the heart of it all, he doesn't know how any of this really works. His childhood was normal, not the war-torn mess that apparently accompanied Tubbo's. Maybe that's a point for sympathy, but Ranboo *can't* sympathize. He doesn't know what it feels like to have friends die around him on the battlefield, or be almost-executed for espionage, or be president of a

nation two logs and a stray dynamite away from crumpling over. He can be compassionate, maybe, but he understands far less than Tubbo does.

“And what would you suggest, Karl Jacobs?” Ranboo asks. He doesn’t bother to hide the cold edge of his tone.

Karl Jacobs doesn’t look fazed. “Well - even given what you don’t do, there’s still ways to prepare for tomorrow. You can’t un-become First Lady immediately, but that doesn’t mean you’ll be First Lady forever. Not if you make certain decisions. You know-”

He pauses then, and twists to nod at the likeness of Wilbur Soot smiling brightly down upon them. He looks nothing like the madman he was and every bit like the glorious revolutionary he had promised L’Manberg to be. “You know,” Karl Jacobs begins again softly, “Wilbur sought his own release from his prison. I’m glad he’s achieved it.”

*So my options are servant, fugitive, or dead,* Ranboo thinks with no small level of exasperation. *Good to know.*

But maybe that’s not extent of what Karl Jacobs means. Is it another caution of simply keeping an open mind?

He supposes that at some point, he should start picking options, whatever they may be. Not today, though - Ranboo is exhausted. He had never thought he would detest meeting new people as much as he does now. It’s all about the circumstance.

*It’s quite interesting, though, how quickly the environment seeps into the person.*

Ranboo blinks, and Karl Jacobs is gone. Has he blanked out again? Another hole in his memory? It didn’t feel like it, but that means little.

Sometimes his friends or parents have been able to snap him out of the dazes, and sometimes not. Maybe Karl had simply given up and left.

The last thing he needs is someone spreading rumors about him being possessed or something. Karl didn’t seem like the type, but Ranboo knew the man for all of 10 minutes - who was he to make that judge of character?

The hallway is empty, though the sunlight still shines as bright as it dares onto New L’Manberg.

Ranboo takes a deep breath, makes a quick note in his memory book again, and decides it’s about time he retreats back into his room. Maybe now Tubbo and Fundy will let him squirrel away in there for a little while longer than last time.

The eyes of Schlatt and Soot bore into him, as though judging. Ranboo doesn’t care. They are dead and have no power over him, despite whatever symbolism Niki or the rest would like to imagine. Though they’re the reason for this mess he’s stuck in, he didn’t know them; they are now naught but remnant paintings.

But he can't help wondering if Tubbo feels the ex-presidents' phantom hands pressing his responsibilities down upon him. If it crushes him with the dread of consequences the way the gray-fog air of the City of L'Manberg bores down upon its inhabitants all day and night with toil, regret, sorrow, scraped survival, sullied stories.

~\*~

*He's leading someone by the hand. They might be crying; he's not sure. He doesn't know. They are small, like a child. They are a child. They tug him towards the portal.*

*Ranboo refuses. He's not going in. What? He isn't! Why is this child making him? Why is he obligated to go in? Why is the child with him?*

*Someone tells him his child has something wrong with him - he should get him to a doctor soon. Ranboo tells them the child isn't his.*

*But why is the child with him, then? How is he supposed to know? It's not through any action of his own, that for sure.*

*The child is crying again - choked, whinnied sorts of squeals. Tiny tusks spire up. Ranboo's not sure where to go. He doesn't like this at all.*

*He doesn't like this. He doesn't want this. Why are they making him. Why does he have to do this. Why is he obligated to do this. Why him. Why anyone. Why him.*

*No.*

*No.*

*The child's still crying. He's struck with the urge to shut him up by any means necessary*

*Be quiet. Shut up. Please. No, not please. That's a command. No, wait--not a command. He's not commanding a child. He's not supposed to command the child - the child isn't his.*

*Everyone's looking at him weird.*

*Tubbo's looking at him weird.*

*"No," Ranboo says. "Absolutely not."*

*"I suppose not, then," Tubbo responds. Ranboo's struck with a sudden sense of pleasant surprise, though the surprise shouldn't be all the surprising upon further thinking.*

*The child is gone. Not coming back. He should feel emptier and maybe one day there might return a minute inkling of that feeling but for now he's glad and he will be for a long time.*

*"That's one more thing taken care of," Tubbo says. He's turning back to his papers. Ranboo doesn't understand the papers, though he's beginning to. He decides to go back to his room. Enderchest greets him there, as does JJJJJeffery. JJJJJJeffery is Enderchest's friend; he*



*doesn't know where she came from. But they own his bed now. He would feel emptier if they were gone.*

When Ranboo wakes the next morning he is in his room in the White House and there are new entries in his memory book he doesn't remember writing. That's normal enough, so he continues with his day. Another public appearance will keep Fundy off his back for a little while longer.

~\*~

When Ranboo wakes the next morning he is no longer in his room in the White House and there is black rope chafing deep into the groove of his wrists.

Something obscures his eyes. Something cold. Something tight.

“Hey, I think princey here is awake!”

The realization comes to him like a sudden, screeching halt.

It's a kidnapping.

## Chapter End Notes

(spouse of new lmanberg president is always called “First Lady” for linguistics/cultural reasons im too tired to explain rn. there's an explanation in one of the chapters of the previous fic in the series but its not important enough to type it out again here)

(grecian instead of greek bc kinda dubious greeks also existed in this au so i fuffed about with the name and left it as an ambiguous language convention ie there might be places which call them the Greeks but New L'Manberg is not one of them)

woo boy. this was supposed to be like a 10k one-shot but those plans have been shot to dust. sorry this took so long ive been promising this for months slkdjflkjslkj hopefully chapter 2 doesn't take as much time. Irl's been kicking me but ive been finding ways to carve out time for writing

yes ranboo is a lot less of a yes-man than he is in canon but this is mostly his upbringing being relatively sheltered and i dare-say pampered at times, thus giving him a much higher standards for his quality of life, and also his inner saltiness is justified given what hes been put through lol. i maintain that ranboo is at his best when he's at least semi-self aware. also the angrier he is the more confident he gets in his speech?

surprisingly id say the most uncomfortable of the stuff is over. maybe most of you didnt even pick up on the implications sdjlkdfsjf i really went out on the symbolism and allusions here. subtext is everything in this fic. its not exactly the kind of narrative the fandom cares about but i think it was important to write it the way i did. while this is a

prequel of sorts to Valley of Serenity, it is very much telling its own story. the tone is different, the ideas are different, the style is different. it's written with a very different mindset in mind.

this fic does recontextualize ranboo in a different light in Valley of Serenity. i cant say it was originally planned this way, but this fic ended up what it is. yes, i consider it canon to VoS. remember that the unreliable narrator tag applies to pretty much everyone in both that fic and this one. but you're free to draw your own conclusions and decisions.

there were originally even more kinda disturbing things, some of which i eventually decided to cut out because it was edging the line of really uncomfortable when applied to the nebulous line of c!ranboo as placed in context of his actor, cc!ranboo. they would have emphasized more of this fic's themes, but i deemed the risk of portrayal not worth it. just know that this means there are potential "missing scenes" in this fic which don't necessarily add new content (since i reworked certain parts after the cuts), but emphasize and enforce more heavily certain already uncomfortable aspects.

no there will be no consistency about how many js are in JJJJJJJJeffery's name

# there before the threshold

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The comforting thing about being a political hostage is that political hostages are generally more useful to the kidnappers alive.

The less comforting thing about being a political hostage is that political hostages have a rather unfortunate tendency to be publicly executed.

“Could you find me a more comfortable chair?” Ranboo complains as more rope is secured around his legs. The seat below him is thin and punched with jagged holes, making for a rather uncomfortable sitting experience. He feels moments away from its collapse.

“We can’t even afford food, and you want a more comfortable *chair*?” One of his kidnappers asks incredulously. “Talk about entitled.”

Ranboo scowls. “Well, it’s not exactly *my* fault this country is terrible. And as I recall, *you people* were the ones who brought me here in the first place.”

“You’re the president’s husband,” another kidnapper says, like that proves anything.

There’s only two people in the room with him right now, but considering the audacity of literally kidnapping the First Lady of the nation, Ranboo doesn’t doubt there’s a lot more involved. That’s unfortunate, because Ranboo would really like to leave this place alive.

The room they’re in is windowed on one side, and the level of sunlight tells him it’s sometime shortly after noon. The room appears part of a larger house. Though his head is forced mostly away from directly seeing outside, the tiny glimpse from the corner of his eye also tells him they’re somewhere forested, and a decent distance from the capital - though the trees are dull with spindly branches and a few clinging brown leaves, they lack the corroding gray-back of L’Manberg’s vegetation.

“So, got any evening plans?” Ranboo eventually ventures after a brief silence.

“Murder,” one of the kidnappers - a woman with a nose that reminds Ranboo of a snake’s, says almost immediately.

“She’s joking,” the other one, whose chin looks like a raven’s beak, quickly adds.

“I’m not joking *that* much,” Snake-Nose says. “You don’t know what Connor’s decided to do with him yet.”

Ranboo wriggles against his bonds a little more, to no avail. The scale of his situation is slowly seeping back to him - holy fucking shit, he’s been kidnapped. Because these people don’t like Tubbo, probably.

Tubbo has enough trouble getting the relevant people to listen to him on a daily basis. There's no way he'll be able to muster the resources needed to find him in this place. That's not... that's not good. He might die here.

"You guys are part of a revolution whose plans you don't even know?" he asks, attempting to deflect. Might as well pry some information from this. "That's kind of a stupid thing to sign your life over to."

Snake-Nose bristles. "You know what we do know? That we'd rather not have *another* foreigner lording over us, that's what."

Ranboo blinks. In all the chaos of New L'Manberg's history, it's easy to forget that just like him, *Tubbo* isn't a native citizen either. Him, Fundy, Wilbur Soot, and this Tommy Innit person had all arrived from the south, though details about where each had come from was scarce.

By some accounts, the original reason they had come here was to visit Niki, who had been considered Tubbo's... adoptive sister? Guardian figure? Everything's unclear on that front.

"I'm not exactly the one lording over you here," Ranboo says. "That's the Parliament. Tubbo Underscore can't even pass his own bills - they have to be approved by the majority first."

That's technically true, if one discounts how most of the Parliament can be threatened into passing bills via Tubbo's current established, if tenuous, control of New L'Manberg's shattered military. His past war experience has at least given him, as well as Fundy and Niki, some control in that field - something which Quackity and most of his coalition lack.

"He's the *President* - please, we all know what Schlatt and Soot managed to do. He's got even more power than them," Snake-Nose says.

"T-Maya," Raven-Chin says. "We shouldn't talk to the prisoner like-"

"And why not?" Snake-Nose challenges. "I signed up to fight for New L'Manberg's future. For the resistance's ideals. Why shouldn't I proclaim my reason to fight? Without them we'd both be starving in a ditch somewhere."

"I mean, it's not exactly like I can do anything about... any of this," Ranboo points out. "Telling me is kind of useless."

Well, there go his plans to weasel information. They always did say his mouth might get the better of him some day.

"No. That's not the point." Snake-Nose raises a finger at Ranboo. Part of the nail is torn off; the skin crusted dirty gray and black. Ranboo realizes he might not look much better. "It doesn't matter that none of this is your fault or that you can't do anything. You're a symbol just like our flag is a symbol. And symbols *matter*. You represent everything that's going wrong with New L'Manberg - skewed priorities, inability to keep order, foreigners meddling in our politics when they should have just stayed where they came from."

“So if you had a place to live and a stable food source, you wouldn’t have kidnapped me?”  
Ranboo checks.

“Isn’t that what we all want?” Raven-Chin responds.

“The problem is that no one in New L’Manberg’s government has the ability to summon food from nowhere,” Ranboo says. “Or houses out of nowhere. Or to order the SMP troops away from the border.”

“But they’re not the best fit to get us out of this situation,” Raven-Beak says. “You could say Underscore and Soot’s foreigner status doesn’t matter. You could say they live just as miserably as us. But they’re not making the changes - not fast enough. So what if it’s because of resistance from other Parliament members? They’re letting politics get in the way of what is necessary. We need a unified government acting decisively, and we need it *now*. That’s why you’re here. That’s why we’re essentially staging a rebellion. This is the message we’re trying to send to the rest of New L’Manberg.”

Ranboo glances around the decrepit room. By his best guess, it’s probably the former mansion of some old lord who recently died. Perhaps it’s being funded by his or her heirs, eager to guide New L’Manberg in the direction they believe best. Perhaps they’re still clinging onto that former hope - that New L’Manberg could go back to the way it was. Perhaps they have the hope of another New L’Manberg, equally strange but wholly different from the nation Tubbo and the Parliament are so constantly battling over every day in the Choir Chamber.

What do they have? Some people, some money, meagre food and shelter about as well as the rest of them. A dozen or so miles of distance from the capital, most likely. From the White House. Ranboo’s a bit more sensitive to these environmental changes than the average human, on account of his... inhumanness.

“Miserable little rebellion you have here,” he says finally.

Snake-Nose spits a curse. Raven-Chin shakes his head. “I don’t know why I bothered,” he says.

“Oh, I understand what you were saying,” Ranboo says. “I’m just still rather angry at the whole kidnapping part. You should understand. From the sounds of it, you’re not going to ask for a ransom.”

The Treasury’s too broke to afford a ransom, but that’s also common knowledge. Half of Tubbo’s headaches are about how to stymie the exponential growth of their debt into something they’ll actually be able to pay off in the foreseeable future.

Sanek-Nose and Raven-Chin share glances.

“This is more of a public declaration,” Snake-Nose says. “The point is to let the world know who we have - to show how weak *they* are. How they need to be replaced. If your head goes chop-chop, it’ll motivate others. It’ll let them know they have the option to join us - to rebel.”

“Oh. Delightful.” Ranboo tilts his head. “Do you know who’s going to head this supposed new government?”

Raven-Chin frowns. “Connor is the leader of our rebellion.”

Ah, Connor. He recently quit his post at the White House. Ranboo supposes he now knows why.

“Yeah, but does he get absolute power? Or will there be others who share some power with him? Have *you* guys worked out how to best distribute food or coordinate building projects? Insurance? What about the court system? The military leaders? Trade deals?” Ranboo takes a shallow breath. “If the government and policies keep changing, other nations will be much less likely to do business. New L’Manberg once prided itself on being a center of commerce - the area around here isn’t great in the natural resource department.”

“That’s not *our* job to decide,” Snake-Nose snaps. “Does the common soldier need to know every intricacies of his nation’s battle tactics?”

“But do you know if your rebellion *has* any plans about what to do once they’re in power?” Ranboo asks. “Sure, you don’t need to know everything. But if you went and asked some questions, would they be able to answer them, or at least give a good idea of how they might tackle the issue?”

Turns out, attending Parliament meetings *has* given him some idea of New L’Manberg’s situation. Flaming back these idiots still isn’t worth all the boredom, though.

“Connor and his advisors will decide,” Snake-Nose says. “And they’ll get it done, without any petty squabbling.”

Ranboo snorts. Theoretically, any government is set up to run things without petty squabbling. “With you and what resources?”

The past few days have been an upgrade for those in the White House and in the most need of shelter, because the first round of food and building aid have finally arrived from Hypixel. Fundy’s also been talking of researching into better shipping technologies, as a way to cut the transport time of 2-3 weeks between New L’Manberg and Hypixel even shorter.

If Ranboo’s head ends up on a pike, and the current government is deposed... it’s rather safe to say Hypixel won’t be willing to invest in New L’Manberg again.

“We have sustained ourselves for generations,” Raven-Chin says. “My family has owned and farmed the same land for as far back as anyone can remember. We fed half the people in our village. We know where iron deposits are. We have established trade routes.”

Trade routes. Ranboo resists another noise of incredulity.

The sun has almost entirely set. He realizes this abruptly when Snake-Nose lights a candle and sets it on the bone-bare table in the room. The outside is dark. He can hear the chirping screeches of crickets.

“It’s about time our shift ends,” Snake-Nose says. She glances towards the door. “Those lazy bastards, probably still gorging themselves on our portion-”

She doesn’t finish before Ranboo is smashing her head into the wall in a blaze of purple particles. Raven-Chin startles, but can’t pull himself together fast enough to dodge Ranboo’s second punch. He knows exactly where to hit for the best chance of landing a killing blow - his fist strikes fast and hard. Raven-Chin crumples to the ground with a gurgling grunt.

All that tournament training back in Hypixel paid off after all. No child of noble parents isn’t taught battle knowledge, however ceremonial some of the moves might actually be. For once, Ranboo allows himself a little pride at the title “discount Technoblade”. Just like the former champion, he knows where and how to hit.

And for once, Ranboo is glad for his enderman half. Teleporting isn’t something he can do with regular frequency, nor is the destination something he has exact control over - but for this situation, that calls for a small, short burst to somewhere nearby, it had been perfect for getting him out of his rope-bound chair.

He doesn’t have much time, though. Ranboo searches through Snake-Nose and Raven-Chin’s bodies - looting fast is another thing he’s exceptionally good at. He turns up three knives, some practically useless coins, and a blowgun with a pouch of darts. He’s not sure what their effects are, but he takes them anyway. For good measure he also takes Raven-Chin’s belt to store the blades, and Snake-Nose’s padded leather jacket complete with pockets. There’s a few personal notes in there, a list or two, some doodles. Ranboo decides to keep them for now.

It’s kind of unfair that these people get better clothing than Ranboo and the White House inhabitants do.

Bodies sufficiently looted, he stretches up and tries to scramble together a plan beyond just “run and hope for the best.”

The first mistake was to place him in a room with windows that let him estimate the time. He can’t see through the night’s darkness any better than the average human, but what he does have is enhanced hearing and a better sensitivity to the heat signatures of living things.

With another strong bout of focus, Ranboo finds himself yanked through the space-time fabric of the universe. The world trembles; curls; rights him back again. He opens his eyes and finds himself outside the house he had been kept in, boots crunching through reedy grass. The air bites cold; he fights back a shudder. Even with his cotton shirt and leather jacket, the chill hisses through every creak of his bones.

Alright. First step is probably to get away from here. If he were a true enderman, a few teleports would bring him back to the capital - but Ranboo is already fighting through dizziness from his previous two warps. If he tried again, he would either pass out or go back into his memory-erasing enderwalk state - neither of which he can risk.

It’s a last resort for if he gets cornered again, he decides. Being in his vulnerable enderwalk state is how he got kidnapped in the first place.

Speaking of which, he's still not sure how exactly that happened. Where had he been? What had he been doing?

*Focus! You're surrounded by people who want to stab you.* Ranboo shakes his head once, twice, and glances up. The night sky is as dark as the rest of the land, clouds and ash shadowing the moon to not even a crescent.

He keeps a hand on one of the knives sheathed in the belt. Not being able to see the moon leaves cardinal directions dubious, but it's at this point he should keep his mind more on escaping than anything else. He turns his back to the mansion and begins a slow creep through the backyard of grass and into the forest.

Once that terrifying stretch of open space is crossed, Ranboo relaxes. The forest surrounds him wholly in darkness - no light, branches everywhere. A few leaves. Some stubborn shrubbery. They layer to form a rustling cover he takes his shelter in.

Though he's beginning to feel sleepy as the adrenaline wears off, Ranboo resists a yawn and presses onward through the unbroken forest. Twigs crackle with every step, overcome with only the chirp of crickets and the rush of some nearby water source. A dead leaf scratches his chin. He can only make out the faintest shadows, like smears of ash on a black canvas, and moves step by cautious step, slow as a caterpillar.

After a few minutes of this, just as Ranboo thinks he might be in the clear, the shouting starts.

Great. They've found out. A quick glance back reveals the faintest glow of light visible through the foliage - a torch or lantern of some kind, no doubt seeking him.

Ranboo picks up his pace, crashing through branches. He'll just have to hope that the sound of his pursuers' own chase will mask his.

His hopes are abruptly dashed when his outstretched hand hits iron bars, bouncing him back with a cold spring, and he realizes the property is fenced.

Fucking gods, no. If he tries teleporting again, he's pretty sure he'll pass out. He's already breathing hard, his stick of a body swaying like a torn banner in the window. He can't...

Maybe he can hide. There's many searchers, but from the looks of the lights they're fairly spread apart - and probably not anticipating him fighting back if he has to. His dark side will blend with the forest as well.

Ranboo breathes softly, through his teeth, one or two streams of bitter-cold air. Then he flattens down into a laying position, belly-down and begins slowly dragging himself into a bush cover.

Footsteps near.

"He's probably long gone by now," someone close says.

"We have the whole property fenced and guarded. No one can just run out-"



“No one can just teleport away either, and yet no one saw him come out the hallway...”

The voices fade away. Ranboo’s left with another realization - if he teleports again, he’ll have to cross a longer distance. The perimeter outside the fence will probably have guards as well.

That rules out any teleporting for the rest of the night. Great.

Something shatters nearby - glass, maybe. He frowns, glancing up, but doesn’t see anything besides the glow of another lantern.

Then the shouting starts again. There’s the telltale *whizz* of an arrow, and the squelch of it tearing flesh.

Another attacker? But who-

“It’s the administration!” someone shouts.

Oh. They’ve managed to track him down?

Ranboo glances up again to realize the glow of the firelight is suddenly much, much larger than before. And it’s expanding outward in every direction, a huge and rising fire.

With a curse he scrambles up and begins running. One of the lanterns must have been smashed in the confusion and set the forest alight. With the waters contaminated and the sun barely bothering to show itself in the day, the vegetation around L’Manberg’s area had shriveled into former husks of themselves, barely surviving. Perfect tinder, apparently.

Ranboo has no plans of becoming roast hybrid tonight. Screw whatever fence blocks the property - he’s finding the gate and he’s stabbing whatever idiot’s still guarding it. A quick flick, and he’s back on his feet with a knife clutched in one hand.

In the confusion of the fire, rapidly swelling into an Infernus monster with each passing second, Ranboo is easily able to slip past the panicking rebels and follow the fence long enough to find a large latched gate, iron-wrought, and the post abandoned. He kicks the door and it swings free with a bang. So much for these people sticking to their ideals.

He wastes no time dashing out. The gate leads to a path that sprawls into a lawn, and then beyond, from his faint vision, are fields upon fields of what he presumes are shriveled crops. There’s far less cover than the forest behind the mansion, but Ranboo already sees several dark shapes running away from the now aflame property. Without hesitation, he follows suit.

He stays on the path, trying to keep his eyes to the ground in case someone spots their glowing, mismatched color. The fields crawl into long stretches, and a glance back reveals the dead crops closest to the mansion have also caught on fire. The flames leap into the night like the highest spectacle, reaching for the moon, the stars, an impassioned proclamation. He’s never understood why people find fire so entrancing until now; it takes considerable energy to tear his glances away and continue running. The light spreads so far that he now has little worry of tripping on something unseen.

Eventually the fields give way to a canal of water, and then into the dirt roads of what looks like a village. There's a few people on the streets outside, having been awoken by the commotion of the fire and faint shrieks from the hill upon which the mansion sits.

People are burning in there, Ranboo realizes with a suddenly coiled stomach. The fire had spread so much faster than he anticipated...

A yowl cuts through the air. Ranboo has no time to brandish his knife before something furry smashes into his leg, nearly tossing him into the dirt. Twin green eyes blink into his own.

"Enderchest?" he asks. "How did you get here?"

Then, leaping from the shadows, the shape of JJJJJJJJJeffery joins her in the soft purring.

"Ranboo!" Ranboo nearly jumps again as someone - Hbomb, he remembers, that's his voice - runs up to him. "How'd you - no, let's get out of here. Sooner the better."

Hbomb doesn't wait for a reply, but instead grabs Ranboo's hand and begins tugging. There's more townspeople now, but most of them are too busy staring at the thundering fire to pay them much mind. A few are whispering about whether they should evacuate, or whether the canal and dirt crossroads will stop it.

"Where are we-"

"We've got horses nearby," Hbomb says. "It's an hour's ride from L'Manberg. I'll explain more later - the important thing is to get out *right now*."

Ranboo doesn't argue. Enderchest and JJJeffery run after them, keeping pace. After a minute they reach a lantern post to which two large horses have been tied. Hbomb mounts one and Ranboo quickly mounts the other, which also has twin saddlebags. Enderchest leaps into one empty bag and JJJJJJJJJJJeffery into the other.

Hbomb slashes the ropes with a knife. Then they're riding back into the dark wilderness beyond the town, fire raging behind them, fast and roaring into the night like a defiant deity doomed to die.

~\*~

"Tubbo organized the plans, but since he can't leave the capital I led the strike itself," Hbomb explains.

Ranboo sips his cup of tea again. It's thankfully warm, almost steaming, and swirled with enough milk that his tongue reacts with only light tingling.

They're back in the White House, Enderchest and JJJJJJJJJeffery curled together on a large pillow on the hardwood floor while Tubbo, Hbomb, and Ranboo crown one of the large rounded couches that survived November 16th. A table with Tubbo's drawn rescue plans is before them, as is a plate with cookies and a teapot.

"So Enderchest and JJJJJJeffery found me in the town?" Ranboo asks.

Hbomb nods. "We narrowed the location down to that village from a few... captured sources. But your cats were the ones who insisted on coming along and ran for the mansion. They're smart animals."

"Of course." Ranboo exhales slowly. In, out. In, out.

"How did you get out of the mansion?" Hbomb suddenly asks. His expression turns morose. "I was... we weren't expecting the fire. I was scared for a while that you had choked to death on the smoke."

Ranboo worries his lips for a moment. Should he tell them? His teleportation is a hidden card, potentially crucial to his plans of eventual escape.

"I managed to steal a knife from one of my guards and kill them," he finally says. "Then I smashed a window and ran out. They planned this kidnapping kind of poorly."

"They're organized rather poorly too," Tubbo says. His voice is quiet. "It's why we hadn't paid much attention to them until now. I wasn't - I didn't think they'd go so ambitious as to *kidnap* someone."

Is... is Tubbo guilty? He seems so. Ranboo frowns.

"These things happen," he finally says, shrugging. "Not like any of us could have predicted it."

Then comes another hesitation. His enderwalk state... he's never been left so vulnerable because of it. If someone has to know, it might as well be Tubbo, and Hbomb, whom Tubbo seems to trust well enough.

He can't hide it forever. They'll ask questions eventually, so he might as well...

"There's - uh. Do you know where I was when I got kidnapped?" Ranboo ventures.

Tubbo exchanges a glance with Hbomb. "...no?"

"A security breach." Hbomb frowns. "Where were you? The place must be compromised..."

"That's the thing," Ranboo says. "I don't know where I was either."

Tubbo stares silently. Hbomb clears his throat, but conspicuously doesn't talk either.

"I have... memory problems," Ranboo continues. He forces down the urge to swallow. "Like - sometimes I go stretches of time where I'm on... a kind of auto-pilot. It's gotten better since I was really young, but..."

"Like - like you can't remember what happened at certain times?" Tubbo asks.

Ranboo nods. "It's why I have a habit of writing in that book I always carry around. I call it my memory book." With a bit of fumbling, he slides it from the pocket of his trousers, the

contents of which his kidnappers hadn't thought to check. "I write what's happened every day in it, so I can check if I've forgotten something."

"What if you forget to write in it?" Hbomb asks. To Ranboo's relief, neither him or Tubbo seem overly angry about him having hidden his memory issue for so long, though the thoughtful expression Tubbo holds is a little troubling.

"I used to do that more often too," Ranboo says. He chews his lip - an old habit resurfacing. "My parents were a great help though. They kept reminding me to write in it all the time when I was younger. I eventually got into a - a kind of muscle memory for it, you know? I usually have a few entries every day now."

Hence why he had brought empty notebooks with him - he runs through them fast. Given the shortage of everything besides polluted water here in L'Manberg, it ending up being a good call.

"Does it-" Tubbo breaks off, looking hesitant, but steels his expression after a moment. Ranboo watches the change with some fascination. He had thought a political leader like Tubbo would either be a master of a blank face, or get steamrolled over in political debates with the Parliament members. But time and time again in the still relatively short period Ranboo's been here, both of those assumptions have been proven wrong.

"Does it have something to do with your hybrid side?" Tubbo asks, and this time there's no hesitation. But there's no clear demand either - it's a question, plain and simple. Ranboo thinks he appreciates the sentiment.

"Probably," he says. "You never know what the dice will roll with hybrid traits. My mother says I'm lucky I wasn't miscarried in the womb too. Umm... my memory's been the main issue, really. So yeah, it's probably because something in my enderman side conflicts with my human side. My brain apparently has a lot of contradictions in it."

Ranboo considers himself lucky too, in all honesty. He's known a lot of hybrids who die early, from disease or frailer bodies or just otherwise unnatural traits that resulted from incompatible species conjoining traits together into a life. Sure, he has memory issues, but he won't shatter like glass or succumb to the smallest cold, and even if his proportions are a bit stretched, they haven't posed any life-threatening problems for him so far.

The problem is that back in Hypixel, he had his parents and friends and general acquaintances who understood and helped him. Here he has only Tubbo and maybe Hbomb, both of whom have far too many other things going on to keep track of his memory issues.

"Okay." Tubbo runs a hand over his head. "So. Sometimes you do stuff and you don't remember it later."

Ranboo nods. "Yeah, that's it." He flips through his book. "And because of the whole kidnapping thing, I never got the chance to write what happened down."

Hbomb leans back. Ranboo feels his eyes on him; judging, maybe? Or maybe not. He doesn't seem like the type, and his gaze has a quality wholly unlike Quackity's or even

Tubbo's - it's something that has, just maybe, the tiniest inkling of understanding.

"We still have to debrief about what *did* happen," he says. "Ranboo, how about you tell us what you do remember? Again, just to recap."

Ranboo nods. "Okay. Um - I don't remember where I was or what I was doing when I got kidnapped, but I do remember being knocked out at some point and then waking up in a room at that mansion place. There were two people standing guard over me - we argued a bit about what they were doing because they were stupid enough to not put a gag over my mouth."

Tubbo, for some reason, looked vaguely horrified at this statement. Ranboo presses on. "Then I - well, there was this fire. Very big. Very hot. Kind of dangerous. So they panicked and one fell over me, and I kinda - I managed to slice my ropes on their knife and uh. Then I punch them. I'm pretty sure they're dead."

"You... sliced your ropes on their knife? While they fell down?" Hbomb asks with a reasonable amount of skepticism.

Ranboo tries his best imitation of a casual shrug. "I'm not sure how I did it either. Pure luck, I guess. But then there was this - ah. This fire right outside the house. And the house was pretty close to catching on fire. So, you know, I figured it was about time I got out of there, so then I broke the window in that room and hauled myself outside. And then I was running from there."

"You managed to outrun the fire with that little time?" Tubbo asks.

Ranboo hopes he's not sweating. "Um. Yeah. I have - you know. Long legs."

"That is true," Hbomb muses. Then he straightens. "Okay. So, our side of the story, as I've already mentioned a bit before, begins when Tubbo realized you were missing. We researched a bit, couldn't find you, and then Quackity came and told us some of his agents had gotten word of a plot to kidnap the First Lady. We looked into it, narrowed the options down to Acheron Manor - that's the name of the place you were taken to - and assembled a squad to get you. Tubbo obviously couldn't leave the capital, but he had me and a few trusted former military members go for the extraction."

"How did you guys know I was at - that manor?" Ranboo asks. *And what was that about Quackity's agents?*

Tubbo shrugs, taking another bite out of his cookie. "We needed a good system of informants during both revolutions," he explains. "Wilbur and I kept track of a list of people who were willing to report various tips to us. There was a whole underground system going on. After November 16th it mostly broke apart, but I still keep in regular contact with some of them, especially those closer to the capital. It's important to know about civilian activity when everything's so uncertain."

Interesting. Presumably, this system of spies wouldn't hesitate to report Ranboo's location if he were to ever go "missing" again.

“Quackity’s also got his own system going on,” Hbomb adds with a briefly troubled expression. “We’re not sure about the details. But anyway, we decided we had to be as stealthy as possible to avoid any of them trying to threaten you in a hostage situation. The original plan was to scout out where you were, quickly pick off the rebels one by one, and surround you with guards as soon as we could.” He winces. “The fire was not part of the plan.”

“How did the fire even start?” Tubbo suddenly looking very tired. Ranboo gets the faint impression he’d rather be asleep than doing anything else right now, which makes two of them. “That village mostly survived, but the grain warehouse caught and burned down entirely. We have to reroute more food supplies now.”

“That’s fine, actually.” Hbomb grimaces. “If the new food shipments continue at the rate it has, we’ll be in a stable situation regarding food pretty soon. The problem is that people are asking why the L’Manberg military is suddenly going around burning buildings.”

“Is that what they’re saying?” Ranboo asks. That would be... about what he expected, actually. People take advantage of their situations. Of course someone would have...

“They’re spreading word about our ‘violent’ and ‘oppressive’ tendencies,” Tubbo growls. “I fucking swear, as if we need-” he breaks off, appearing to force himself into a restrained halt. A pained look comes over him. “It’s alright. It’s nothing we haven’t dealt with before.”

Well. Okay. Ranboo is most decidedly *not* touching that can of endermite today.

“I - well. I’m pretty sure the fire started because one of the rebel guards outside broke their lantern,” he says. “Possible when they got shot down.”

“That would make the most sense, yeah,” Hbomb says. “Something to keep in mind for the future. We’re lucky the fire was a small one. It burned out pretty quickly.”

It certainly didn’t *feel* small, but Ranboo supposes that’s just a heat of the moment thing. He nods.

“Anything else you guys want to go over?” he asks, downing the last of his cold tea. “Otherwise, I’d like to go sleep another week.”

Hbomb and Tubbo exchange another glance.

*Them and their looks*, Ranboo thinks. He wonders what it would feel like to know someone so well they could communicate non-verbally in the way Tubbo and his (Friend? Guard? Assistant?) did. A strange way of going about things. He’s seen those kinds of communications back in Hypixel too - team tournaments often saw the highest scoring group pull off unbelievable maneuvers based on information they could pass to each other, unseen by the other team, through signs and other indicators.

It’s not something Ranboo ever had, though. He had a few friends he could work well enough with, but that was then and this is now. He doubts he would be able to compete in a team

tournament the way he used to. It feels like the heavy fog of death that permeates every part of New L'Manberg has draped over not only his shoulders, but also his very being.

"I won't suggest a guard increase," Tubbo finally says. "But let us know if you're going somewhere outside the White House if you can, alright? And we'll keep a closer eye on each other from now on."

"I'll verify the backgrounds of everyone who comes and goes at the White House again," Hbomb says. "Connor was someone we should have rooted out a long time ago."

"We should think about rebuilding the spy network too," Tubbo adds. "Wilbur had this whole system worked out. I think it'll still be useful in our current situation..."

Ranboo decides now is about the time to take his leave. With a quick word, he heads out the small meeting room. A quick beeline is made through the dark corridor and back to his own bedroom. Enderchest and JJJJJeffery follow him without a sound.

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The first thing he does the next day, when he wakes up, is obtain another knife. He still had the knives pilfered from Snake-Nose and Raven-Chin's bodies, but they were smaller and he wanted something with a little weight. Something that was easier to cut - to kill with.

This was not as hard as it should have been. Ranboo wanders the "shoreline" of the sad excuse of an island the White House sits on and finds one stuck half-way in the sand, weathered black and rusted even more, but the blade is long and slightly curved, the length of half his arm. Almost a short sword.

He had gripped the half-exposed handle, wincing through the water droplets that sizzled against his skin, and gave a hard yank. The knife comes up with it, like a potato spud pulled from the hard dirt by its sprouts. He could have fancied himself a farmer in that moment, so strong was the sensation of having pulled something newly grown from the earth. From the water. Sand.

Ranboo may or may not have also been high on something that day.

The point still stands though - he has a long knife. So now, Ranboo has the job of cleaning up this blade. He does this with water in the giant pool washroom, with a waterstone, and a few small towels almost completely worn away.

Enderchest and JJJJJeffery play nearby. This early in the morning, there were few people up. At some point, when Ranboo is trying to scrape off a stubborn piece of rust, Fundy stumbles in. He takes one look at Ranboo's tiny knife-restoring operation before shrugging, walking past, and cleaning himself up for the morning before walking back out the room again.

Ranboo's just about to add a final layer of scrubbing when footsteps splash beside him. For a moment he worries it's going to rain - he'd hate to leave the project when he's so close to being done, but the ceiling is open and rain will pour freely into the room, so there's not that much he can do about it.

But no. It's actually Tubbo, splashing his face with water nearby.

"Uh - good morning," Ranboo says awkwardly. He figures he might as well try his hand at this whole "being polite" thing, since it's just about hit him fully by now that he'll be here for the foreseeable future.

"Good morning," Tubbo yawns back, water dripping in peaks from his hair. It's long and tangled - he might be due for a haircut. Ranboo's pretty sure Tubbo had looked a lot more put together back when they were on the ship to New L'Manberg.

Nonetheless, he simply nods. The next question from Tubbo is rather predictable; "What are you doing?"

"Sharpening a knife," Ranboo says. He's not sure why that look of concern suddenly passes over Tubbo's expression, but he decides to stay quiet. It's not out of any fear, he reminds himself - there's just not that much to say.

"Okay," Tubbo says eventually, faintly. Water drips off his curtain of hair. His eyes are half-obscured by it. Drip. Drip.

"I can fight with it," Ranboo adds. "You know, in case something happens again."

He needs to work out how to get a sheath too, then, or make one himself. How hard can it be to get some scrap leather around here?

"You... did some of that? Back in Hypixel?" Tubbo asks. Upon the frown Ranboo gives, he quickly backtracks. "I - I mean, I thought - I've heard that most of the upper class in Hypixel have significant training."

"Yeah, I guess," Ranboo says. He has a feeling bringing up his "discount Technoblade" nickname wouldn't do him any favors here, considering how much everyone around here seems to want the hybrid's head on a pike. "I played in a lot of tournaments. Got some good scoring." He pauses. Tubbo seems more out of it today than usual - or maybe it's just the early morning. Maybe it's the sleep deprivation. Or both.

Maybe it's just the ever-piling stress. It's probably all of it. The more Ranboo glimpses of Tubbo's life, the more he realizes how much less work the First Lady position is. Or how much less work he can make it be - there's supposedly a whole list of duties he's supposed to fulfill, but he's pretty sure "host social gatherings" isn't a huge priority for anyone around here right now.

As long as he can put off the work, he might as well. At least until the supply shortages and housing issues have been mostly patched up.

"Do you consider yourself good with a sword?" Tubbo asks. Ranboo blinks. Oh, right. He was drifting off again.

"Um." He glances at Enderchest, rolling on the stone floor with JJJJJJeffery pouncing close behind. "I - I'm not sure. I think I do quite like the sword, yeah. I've used a lot of different



weapons. Some people say a certain kind speaks to them, but I've always found that stupid - a weapon is a weapon, you know? It just depends on how well you can use it."

"I've always found weapons to be... not the best method," Tubbo says. "In general. It doesn't feel like it sometimes, but every day since the presidency I'm constantly reminded of how few problems in the world can actually be solved with violence."

"Didn't Technoblade say something about it being the universal language?" Ranboo asks. "You know. With his whole terrorist thing and all."

Tubbo frowns. Too late, Ranboo remembers how he got the scars on his face.

"Yeah," is the reply. "He did say that at one point."

"He was really wrong about a lot of stuff, huh?" Ranboo says, trying to think back to the stories. "And... violent. I guess. Did bad things."

He's not sure where he's going with this.

Tubbo gives a smile, almost sad. "There's more to history than just stories," he says. "Even if it's hard to understand it otherwise. You shouldn't take everything at face value around here."

"I - yeah. I guess that's true." Ranboo stills. He lays the blade down on the soapy wet floor and straightens up. "So what would you say Technoblade's like? I - we've never really talked about your scars. It feels like the obvious place to start. Unless you're..."

"No, I don't mind," Tubbo says, with some nod of reassurance. Ranboo lets himself relax. This isn't... well, it's an olive branch of some sort, nothing he really can't do. It's about time he started actually talking to the relevant people in his life, he supposes. Tubbo is caught in a situation just as strange and unfair as his. "Um..."

"I don't want to pry-"

"No, like I said." Tubbo purses his lips. "I - I don't hate Technoblade as much as I should, to be honest. Both of us were high ranking members of the resistance, remember? And I thought - I knew him. Before the festival. Not terribly well, but we weren't just passerbys that happened to be in the same rebellion either. We had talked quite a few times."

He looks up, into Ranboo's gaze. "I think he regretted that day too. Maybe on some moral level he realized he shouldn't have let himself unleash fireworks on a child so easily. More realistically, it's because it made his brother very upset."

"Brother?" Ranboo asks, blinking. He hadn't - Technoblade is known for, among many other things, being a piglin hybrid. To have a brother with both or even one of the same parents with him-

"Adopted brother," Tubbo clarifies. "But they were so close that if you ignored their appearances, you'd think they were bound together as closely as any blood relation. They had another brother too. Close family." Another hesitation. "That brother's name was Tommy."

Tommy. Ranboo's heard that name thrown around before. From Tubbo and Hbomb, sometimes, when they whisper together in corridors too small and too dark. From... a lot of people, actually. Stuff like "Where Tommy ran off too," or "Should have ran off like Tommy."

"Is that the same Tommy who..."

"Yeah," Tubbo confirms. "Tommy Innit. The former Vice President under Wilbur Soot." He glances around, furtive almost, like they might be intruding upon some great secret. Ranboo does a glance around as well and sees no one. "They... no one's supposed to know this, so don't go spreading it around, okay? But Tommy, Wilbur, and Techno were all brothers. Same adopted father. That's where Tommy went off to - he left New L'Manberg with his family after November 16th."

"Wilbur's dead though," Ranboo points out.

Tubbo sighs. "Yeah. Wilbur's dead. They're - I don't know if they'll ever recover from that. But I'm glad Tommy's found some kind of peace, you know?"

"But not you?"

That's the crux of it, really. Tubbo has, objectively, kind of the worst job Ranboo's ever encountered. Everything that goes wrong in this nation is put upon his shoulders, and anything right has every other lawmaker scrambling to attach the achievement to their own names. He has constant death threats and the utterly unenviable job of sorting out how to keep upright a country that quite frankly should have collapsed a long time ago.

"I... care too much, I guess," Tubbo admits. "Or should I give myself credit like that? True, I could have gone with Tommy, left a power vacuum for someone else to fill. But it didn't feel right. It's a weird-" he pauses, with an awkward wince. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe what?" Ranboo asks. "What do you-"

"I can't bring myself to leave New L'Manberg," Tubbo says. "I don't have a home elsewhere, you see. Never stayed around one place much before, and even when I did it wasn't - I've never *invested* as much as I have into something as I have New L'Manberg. It would feel wrong to abandon it now, when it needs..." he sighs. "I guess there are people willing to fill my steps. But I can't trust them. Most of them. Oh, I know some of them have good intentions, just like mine, but... well, I can't see things from their perspective and they can't see things from mine."

"You can, though," Ranboo points out.

"In most senses, yes," Tubbo says. "See, Quackity. Quackity - we agree on the problems but disagree on the solutions. We can argue as much as we want and present all our points, which we have, but ultimately we still disagree on what's best."

"It's good that there's some compromise going on in the government though," Ranboo says. "To - uh - well. That's what I've always been taught."

“That’s true. That’s true. It’s a bad idea to have all the power in the hands of one person.” Tubbo looks down. “I would say that Schlatt taught us that, but the problem is that Schlatt was never in full control of his government either. No one can be. People will - people will always have a different idea of what’s best, you know? I wasn’t the only one who went against his wishes. But that’s in the past now.”

Tubbo dips his hands in another bucket of water and begins scrubbing. Ranboo finds it rather fascinating, the way his scar ripples back and forth like white ribbons in the murk of the liquid. There’s a certain calmness to it. It foretells some disaster gone - or perhaps having been prevented. But what disaster has been prevented in this shell of a nation?

“Do you think about leaving with Tommy, then?” Ranboo decides to ask. “Because - you know. This whole presidency thing.”

“I don’t regret taking the presidency,” Tubbo says. There’s no hesitation, but too much sadness in his voice. “But I do wish we had never come here in the first place. Maybe then New L’Manberg wouldn’t call me like this - this drug. I don’t know if I should call it that, though it would be funny. It doesn’t feel good to be in, that’s for sure. But I can’t move away. I wish to be with Tommy so badly, but I just - *can’t* leave. Do you-”

He frowns, again. “Well, I guess that’s an obvious answer.”

“Me leaving would be a terrible idea for everyone involved,” Ranboo says dryly. “I think I’ve learned that much by now.”

Tubbo sighs. “Sorry. I - I’m sorry. I didn’t think...”

“The Hypixel admins knew what they were doing,” Ranboo says. “It’s - It’s not your fault. I know what our food situation would be like if you hadn’t made that deal.”

Starvation has already set in for large swathes of the population around the city of L’Manberg. Most of the farming regions in the rest of the nation, while unaffected by the withers, had mass amount of crops seized and sold to foreign markets by Schlatt’s administration, and are barely scraping by themselves.

If Tubbo hadn’t found a way to secure them food and resources in the immediate aftermath, New L’Manberg would have careened into the path of total collapse, instead of the limp, hobbling state they’re in right now. It’s not ideal, but it is what it is. Ranboo’s freedom was one of many things used to buy the lives of thousands. It was the logical thing to do. Even if, selfishly, Ranboo would have chosen the other option.

He doesn’t choose many things in his life. Might as well take advantage of what he can control.

“I should have pushed them to choose someone else, though,” Tubbo says. “When I first saw you I was - I didn’t think this was going to work out well at all.”

Ranboo studies him carefully. Tubbo has that vaguely settled look he usually carries around - like he’s in the middle of pondering some unusual question. Like he’s considering something

of mildly great importance. It is, as Ranboo has learned, a safe expression to carry around the White House.

"I was - fuck. I wasn't exactly pleased with the situation," Ranboo says. "Or should I rephrase that, because the past tense is inaccurate. I am not pleased with the current situation."

Tubbo laughs, a small and hollow sound. "No one is, Ranboo."

"I know."

A meow. They glance to Enderchest, sprawled contentedly on the wet floor. She's one of the few felines who enjoy getting wet and soppy, much to the annoyance of both Ranboo and JJJJJJeffery, who is now trying to climb on top of her head.

"It'll get better," Tubbo says. "Hopefully."

"Hopefully," Ranboo repeats, before letting out a small sigh. "Right. Fucking hopefully."

Tubbo gives him an amused look. "Sometimes it feels like you swear more than I do."

Ranboo shrugs. "Force of habit. Swears in Hypixel are pretty common. In every language." He pauses. "I guess I didn't used to swear that much, or at all. This whole situation brought out a side of me I hadn't realized existed, to be honest."

"Desperation makes new people out of us all," Tubbo says.

Ranboo raises his eyebrow. "And who did you learn that phrase from?"

Tubbo laughs again, this time short - surprised, maybe. "I - yeah, I should have seen that coming." He settles back his posture. "Technoblade told me that once. I think he was trying to explain some things."

"Oh. Cool." Ranboo takes a moment to consider all the implications, before deciding it's not worth the brainpower. "Uh - I guess that's about right."

"It is. In my personal experience, at least." Tubbo blinks. "How'd you know I didn't come up with that, by the way?"

"It just didn't - it didn't sound like you." Ranboo makes some vague gesture and accidentally hits the stone wall with his hand. He rubs the scratched scales carefully and starts again. "I've listened to you speak a lot in the past few weeks, you know? I think I've got a sense of that by now. You're... straightforward. And not nearly as eloquent."

Tubbo nods. "Yeah, that's right. To be honest, Technoblade is the most poetic fucker I've ever met. Just barely beats out Wilbur. Not that all the people calling him a savage brute would lead you to believe that."

"He was... poetic?" Even without all the negative connotations to his name back in Hypixel, Technoblade was still... strong. Unstoppable. Impenetrable in his attack. The - The Blood

God. He did not seem like a man prone to poetics.

“He was a literary - nevermind, actually. That’s a long story.” Tubbo frowns. “But yeah. He’s very eloquent when he wants to be. You wouldn’t know it if you’ve never truly talked to him, which I guess you never will. I doubt he’ll show himself around here ever again.”

The words hit harder than they should. Ranboo studies Tubbo again - Tubbo the president, the teen-yet-not, the one who has kept this nation together by a wire-thin thread. He wouldn’t know his quiet resoluteness, his inner contradictions, if he had never talked to him like he is doing now, like he has dabbled in in the past. Somewhere along the way, Ranboo’s resentment has faded - not to complete oblivion, but into an obscurity so thick he barely every feels its presence anymore. He’s-

He doesn’t even have someone else to blame. The Hypixel admins had made the strategic choice, picking him. Now that Ranboo’s had to see the choices Tubbo makes... well, needless to say there will always be some people thrown under the carriage. Some are more justified in their anger than Ranboo.

He’s surprised he’s thinking like this, actually. They haven’t - they haven’t really talked all that much. There’s been mostly quiet observance between the two, the slowly lowering curtain of awkward hostility. Mostly from Ranboo’s side - but Tubbo had been prone to ignoring him beyond necessary social functions since they were married as well.

“Do you... do you think Tommy will ever come back?” Ranboo asks, because he has the distinct impression that Tubbo has been vastly, vastly underselling the importance of Tommy to his life. To his decisions. Often, nearer to the beginning of his stay here, he often caught Tubbo muttering questions aloud to some phantom presence wholly different from his own. “Tommy,” he might occasionally say. That alone gave Ranboo the impressions he thought he needed. Maybe not, now that they’ve actually discussed Tommy some, but...

“Tommy is... he cares about family more than he cares about New L’Manberg,” Tubbo says. “He would have followed Wilbur to the ends of the Nether and back, you know. He never cared about New L’Manberg itself - not like I did.” Sadness crosses Tubbo’s face again. It’s such a common expression on him, especially in semi-private times like this. “I didn’t - I never had a home the way Tommy did in his family. Niki tried, when I was younger, but it wasn’t - there was only so much she could do. It wasn’t the same.”

“Niki’s still here though,” Ranboo says. “She - she supports you.”

Tubbo smiles again. All his expressions are small, detached, wary, like shadows - but he wears and flits between them all the same. What has worn away his intensity hasn’t worn away this, at least. “She tries, yes. I’m lucky to have the support I do. Niki, Fundy, Hbomb... the Parliament members that try their best to get things done well and efficiently. The small staff here that keep day to day life running...”

“That’s nice,” Ranboo murmurs. “Must be a relief to have all these people, I guess, to help-”

“You count too, you know,” Tubbo says. “You’ve been a help too.”

Ranboo blinks. "I haven't - I've literally done nothing except exist here."

Tubbo chuckles. "Well, I could say the obvious and point out you had your entire life thrown away for the Hypixel treaty. But you're a lot better at gaining respect around here than you know. I think - I think after so many strange policies and obscure political threats, you're a welcome breath of fresh air." Tubbo nods towards the rest of the room - a shallow pool of water, buckets half-empty, rust on the walls, moss and algae in the corners. The place looks abandoned, not the washroom for the lawmaking building of a nation. "We're all in a miserable little bunch here. As much as I rag on some officials for trying to make things difficult, I'm guilty of the same thing. At the end of the day we all have interests we want to protect - family, security, nation."

If Ranboo's being a help by literally doing as little as he can get away with, it's certainly a new high in his life. Some bright point in his existence, he supposes. He's never been that much of a "help" before - but then again, how much help can the average teenager be for an entire nation? His circumstances had been different. He's different from when he first arrived, even - strange and unusual as the change is. It feels as though this new identity has overtaken him in a swift, unseen, unfelt shadow.

"Well," he says. "Thanks. Thanks? I guess. I'm not really sure." He shuffles his feet a bit, and suddenly draws the short sword closer to his side. It'll need more polish before it's ready for true stabbing, though it could work decently well in a pinch right now. He's making a weapon, after all, not a professional kitchen knife; the tear of flesh and organs require less precision than dicing vegetables.

"I've got a feeling you'd rather be of no help," Tubbo says.

"I'd rather not be here, that's true," Ranboo says. Same thing? He's not sure.

"Fair. Fair." Tubbo pauses. "You know, uh - the supply chains have been stabilizing recently. We have a meeting with a Hypixel official coming up - but afterwards the calendar for you should be - clear. There's no need to really - like - for you to stay here all the time."

Ranboo processes the words for a moment. Through Tubbo's stammering is the idea that...

"You're suggesting we take a vacation?" he asks. Tubbo makes a face.

"I'm suggesting *you* take a vacation," he says. "But I can't. It's only fair though - I chose my job and you didn't."

Ranboo knows if he were a better person, he'd feel guilty about leaving Tubbo all alone here again, especially now that he's seen how desperately he craves the company of someone he understands - someone his age. But his mind turns to thoughts of clear skies and warm ocean horizons, the brilliant dawns, and he really can't care enough to hesitate.

But.

"How would that even work?" Ranboo asks, tilting his head.

Tubbo frowns. “I haven’t gotten those details worked out yet. We’ll - we’ll see. I can’t guarantee too much right now, with so many things still - you know. Bad. But I’ll promise you this-”

He turns to stare Ranboo directly in the eyes, a focused intensity; and yet somehow, Ranboo doesn’t feel the slightest tingle of discomfort at all.

“I promise,” Tubbo says, “you will be able to walk out of here free one day.”

~\*~

Things don’t magically become a happy fairytale land.

Some days it feels like things are getting worse, even. Ranboo staggers into his room half-sick and grumbling, Enderchest just a little too fussy to move off his bed.

But other days it *does* feel like something got accomplished. Like things happened - Tubbo and the Parliament and the system of messengers and managers and every bureaucratic official down to the lowest level and their employees as well have come together to - well, never execute things perfectly. But there’s this sense of progress - like they’ve moved the boulder just another foot out of the way.

The food situation is improving. The lake is starting to clear itself of soot. Some days, when Ranboo leans against the sill of his newly installed window, he can almost see the sun through the clouds, the thin rays of sunlight, faltering slightly less than the day before. These are the days of note - the good days, the days to keep track of, to remind himself of when things inevitably fall apart again, though a little less than last time.

There are all kinds of functions for the First Lady - or at least, that was the assumption. Before Schlatt, before Wilbur, back when the original overseer of the Manberg region was in charge of the operations - under the careful guidance of Dream, of course - their spouse traditionally had all kinds of roles.

It mostly boiled down to maintaining the house - the estate. The capitol building, which used to be a separate thing, but has now been consolidated into the White House as well.

Problem Number One is that there is not exactly much to maintain about the White House. Most of it is still a bombed out wreck, and once enough rooms had been rebuilt for the Cabinet and Parliament members who reside in the center of L’Manberg, restoring the rest hasn’t exactly been a high priority.

That’s changing soon. The weather is getting colder, biting, and while they have enough food stored and traded now that famine won’t hit in huge swathes, there is still the issue of diplomacy for other reasons at hand.

“Dream’s pushing at our borders again,” Niki tells him one day. Ranboo nods along, waiting for elaboration, because for someone who’s played as big a part as he did in this nation’s foundation he hasn’t exactly been on many people’s radar. More immediate issues to take

care of, Ranboo supposes, but now that their ports have been mostly rebuilt and their shipping lines secured, it's time they turn to these other matters.

"He's - He still seems pretty mad about something. But Tubbo thinks it's mostly just a show of intimidation for now."

"Let's hope it stays that way," Ranboo says. "What does he want?"

Niki frowns. "I'm not sure, really. I think he's aiming for a blockade, which is strange because most of the SMP's navy is stationed on their east coast. We'll - We'll see. Tubbo has had some plans in the works for a while now to handle the issue."

"Would those plans include a certain kingdom that begins with an S and rhymes with Karklez?"

Niki gives him a wry grin. "You pick up on things quickly. I imagine there's - yeah. He hasn't given us too much detail yet, but rest assured he knows what he's doing. Hopefully."

"Well, they can't marry another poor soul off to him. He's already taken." Ranboo laughs, short and almost giggly. He's not sure why he thinks the joke so funny, but he does and he's found that in a place like L'Manberg, it's better to let himself enjoy what little he can.

Niki grins along with him, though it looks a little forced. That's okay, though. "Yeah. It's probably mutual assurances and stuff - the Dream SMP's been hostile towards their borders recently too."

Ranboo nods. "They'll - They'll figure it out."

~\*~

"Say, Ran-sorry, *First Lady*, what might you be doing today?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm doing today, Sir Quackity," Ranboo says. He drops the firewood he's holding, into the larger pile at his feet. With his avoidance of the general politics around here, he's found himself picking up odd bits of manual tasks - gathering firewood, sweeping floors, keeping inventory of their supplies. On some days he goes out and helps with the reconstruction of the White House - it's coming along a bit quicker now, though still slowly. Bit by bit.

"Ah, yes. Very important work-" Quackity coughs. Ranboo waits for an additional response. When it doesn't come, he turns his back and goes back to sorting the firewood.

"First Lady!"

"You're getting annoying," Ranboo sighs. "First of all, stop smirking with that title all the time and call me Ranboo. Second of all, what the *fuck* do you want?"

"So hard to please," Quackity says, but his expression hastily turns repentant when Ranboo levels another glare at him. "Uh - I'm actually here to ask whether or not you'll be at the meeting with the Sparklez Kingdom representatives tomorrow."



“You’ll be there too,” Ranboo says, frowning. “Why are you tracking me down to ask right now?”

Quackity rolls his eyes. “Is it so bad to want to know what to expect? Also, I’ve been getting some dirty looks around here because of certain annoying rumors, and I’d like to know if-” he coughs. “If Tubbo might try to kick me out. If he’s really adamant about it I’ll stay away, but-”

“And why do you think I’ll know that?” Ranboo asks.

Quackity frowns. “You’re...”

“If I wanted to involve myself so much in Tubbo’s affairs I wouldn’t be gathering firewood right now,” Ranboo says flatly. “Go find someone else to bother, or better yet, grow the spine to ask Tubbo about it yourself. I don’t know why you thought asking me would help with anything.”

Quackity takes a step back.

“We’re not all out to get you, you know” he huffs. “Most of us have far bigger concerns.”

“Thankfully.”

“Wow - okay. Gather the firewood? Absolutely. Manage the inventory? Sure. But - *understand* your position.”

Ranboo takes a step forward. The sword - which he’s fixed up and named *Knife*, carved into the handle, hangs as a comforting presence from his belt. He doubts Quackity has even noticed it’s there.

“I do understand,” he says. “But Quackity, our priorities are simply too different.” He nods towards the door, at the far wall of this living room and swinging freely. Anyone might walk by - maybe it had been as much for Quackity’s own safety. “I don’t know what Tubbo will say at the meeting. He’s doing the planning and I’m completely fine with that. But I do believe that if you ask, he’ll give you a straight answer. Whether or not you’ll like it is none of my concern.”

Quackity stares at him for a long moment. But finally he nods tersely, turns his back, and walks out. Ranboo’s left alone in an empty room again.

His shoulders fall slowly. “What a weird guy,” he mutters, before hunching over to begin sorting the firewood again.

## Chapter End Notes

as you can see this fic is now 3 chapters. chapter 3 will end up being the shortest tho.

special thanks to Mack, Jess, Rhyley, and Crickett for betaing

leave a kudo if you liked and tell me what you thought in the comments if you want i guess??

# of the dawn

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With a final heave the beam falls into place. Ranboo steps aside with a practiced precision, hair just barely brushed by the falling weight.

New L'Manberg once had - still has, really - a thriving shipbuilding industry. It's been the center of many an innovation for the past few decades. Ranboo finds the work, when not so repetitive, actually somewhat relaxing.

The sun is a shy observer behind dark skies today, the winds cool and salty from the sea, the grass reflecting just a bit more dew from the morning than usual. They had a substantial amount of rainfall last night, to the point where the island of the White House had waves lapping up to almost the door. A muddy section of the island, thankfully empty of anything but gravel and debris, had slid quietly into the water.

It had been a convincing argument to at least shore up a bit more of the White House's foundations. The construction had begun this morning, but Ranboo's stayed in the White House more than long enough to last him several lifetimes; it's not exactly an entertaining or cheerful place to be. So instead he had informed Tubbo and Hbomb of his plans for fresh air, and wandered off to see what else he might be able to do.

Contrary to what some people might believe, Ranboo isn't entirely against working. It's a nice reprieve - often the only reprieve - from boredom. But there's only so much firewood he can smugly gather in Quackity's vicinity, and he doesn't want to touch Tubbo's legal documents with a ten-foot pole. There's other duties, of course - more pretentious, more tiring. He doesn't want to think about them either.

So here he is, helping with the construction of a ship - a small state sanctioned job for most around him, paid for not in money but instead sacks of grain and potatoes. Most of the local L'Manberg population don't speak Hypixelise and don't bother with Ranboo's improving, but still basic, Channelise, so communication is done mostly through gestures and broken words.

~\*~

"Hey. You're - First Lady Ranboo, right?"

Ranboo eyes the outstretched hand dubiously. The meeting with Tubbo is already over - what business does the monarch of the Sparklez Kingdom have with him specifically? And in a dingy hallway of the White House, no less, where anyone might stumble across them.

"Yeah," he finally opts for. He makes the handshake as quick as he can. Maybe King Jordan picks up his trepidation, because he quickly releases his hand as well.

A moment passes where the king simply... studies him. Yes, that's what it feels like - Ranboo is being *studied*. It's kind of unnerving, but nothing he hasn't gotten used to by now.

"I heard you're a stranger in a strange land as well," King Jordan finally says. "How's New L'Manberg treating you?"

Ranboo shrugs. His potential responses can't give away anything incriminating about Tubbo or the White House's security.

"As well as you can expect," he says. "Can I help you with anything, King Jordan?"

King Jordan smiles. "Just a bit curious about this place, is all. New L'Manberg is certainly a change of pace from what I'm used to."

"Ah," Ranboo says, nodding slightly and trying to remember how this part goes. "If you want a tour, I'm sure President Tubbo is more than happy to arrange that for you."

"Of course, of course." King Jordan pauses. "I suppose he did something similar for you, when you first came here?"

"Something to that effect," Ranboo says vaguely. The reality was that Ranboo hadn't wanted to bother with a tour, and Tubbo has been too up in arms about trying to keep the country from collapsing to actually push the idea. Ranboo knows quite a bit about L'Manberg now, of course, and through books and conversations he's learned about the other cities and provinces as well - but the places he's been to are still rather limited.

"Do you like this place, then?" King Jordan asks.

Ranboo blinks, a sudden realization striking through his idleness. Is the King of the Sparklez Kingdom trying to gain some information from him to gauge New L'Manberg? Is he looking for signs of weakness? Dissent, perhaps?

"It's alright," Ranboo says - lies. He fights to keep his face even and tries not to turn his back on the King too quickly. "Excuse me, King - King Jordan. I should - uh. Go."

He's not called after as he begins a swift walk back to his room. He hopes that conversation won't cause Tubbo too many problems.

The King hadn't seemed to pay too much attention to him during the meeting itself, had he? Ranboo had thought it was rather productive.

Oh well. At least there aren't any more scheduled in the near future. He'll try his best to avoid national leaders.

~\*~

The deal goes through; the Sparklez Kingdom will provide soldiers to guard the SMP border. They will trade in fleets alongside New L'Manberg's ships. There is much grumbling from some people concerned about national security, but it's widely regarded as a necessity among Parliament.

Ranboo sits in his bed and tries to let most of the news pass by him.

~\*~

*“You’re doing well, I see.”*

*“If this is your definition of ‘well,’ you need to get a new hobby.”*

*Thoron shrugs. “I was merely offering my condolences.”*

*“Why, thank you.” Ranboo’s nails dig sharp at his palms. “But generous as your words are, I’m afraid I’ll have to decline them.”*

~\*~

“So. How’re ya doin’?”

Ranboo surreptitiously slides the wax seal back into the drawer and spins his chair to face Hbomb. A tiny scrape marks the movement, grating his ears with unusual persistency.

“Um - alright,” Ranboo says.

“Can I come in?”

“I... guess?”

Hbomb nods, stepping through and taking a seat on the other chair in Ranboo’s room. He leaves the door open; a chill seeps through behind him. The lamps keep it at bay somewhat, but Ranboo lights another candle and places the stand on the other side of the desk beside him.

“Are you-” Ranboo frowns, and decides to be straightforward with this. He’s not in the mood to dance around subjects today - another exhausting session of trying to keep track of the Parliament’s arguing has left him drained and just about ready to join Enderchest and JJJJJeffery on the bed. Damn whoever in the coalition decided to pitch the idea of making *him* the one to deliver news.

“What are you here for?” he finally decides on after a minute.

Hbomb shrugs. “Just here to check on you a bit. It’s been a rough few weeks.”

“Yeah, it has,” Ranboo agrees, only half paying attention. He’s semi-distracted by the view of the sunlight through the window - newly reinforced with more beams and stronger glass. It shines with an almost brilliant quality to it, like a few gold threads peaking through the copper. There’s not that much of that color in L’Manberg - no, hardly at all.

He once heard Quackity talk about the sunset view in other places of the country. They sound almost as serenely colorful as those back on the Hypixel coasts - the splendors of life painted together in that warm cascade.

Ranboo hasn't seen a sunrise like that since he left Hypixel. He'd like to see one again soon.

"So. Are you feelin' okay? Better? Slightly worse?"

Ranboo shrugs. "Life's been moving."

"As it always does." Hbomb fixes him with a look that's almost sympathetic. "What do you think of New L'Manberg now?"

Ranboo wonders idly where this is going. "Well - it's dark. Still on the brink of disaster."

There's only so much a few threads of relief can do, especially with as little time as barely two months. Food, shelter - the basics have improved. Health, not so much, maybe. It's an endurance battle here. How long can they all remain before succumbing to the still oppressive ashes?

"Is Tubbo feelin' good?"

Ranboo blinks. "Wouldn't you know that better?"

Hbomb shakes his head. "Actually, I run a lot of errands for him in the Dream SMP - border control hasn't realized I'm a government agent yet. But they're clamping down on the passage of merchant caravans, so that cover's mostly blown. I've just returned from what's probably my last trip to the SMP in a while."

"Oh?" Ranboo prompts.

"Well, I'm not an official agent, I guess. Just been passin' some messages, gatherin' information. I've known Tubbo for a long while though. Just - ya know. Sometimes you want a break, and with the SMP conflict rising..."

Sunset quickly fading from Ranboo's mind, he takes in Hbomb's appearance. He does indeed look like he's trudged through a forest at night during a thunderstorm. There's thin lines beneath his eyes, in his expression - much in the same way Ranboo does.

"Why did you get involved in this?" he asks suddenly. It's an incredibly obvious question he doesn't know why he hasn't thought to ask yet. Maybe because it's been so oddly normalized.

"What do you mean?" Hbomb asks. Ranboo makes a sweeping gesture around his utter mess of a room. Most of the trash is from old documents and occasional tears of paper, with clothes and books strewn all everywhere as well.

"I mean, it sounds like there's a lot more enjoyable things you could be doing than getting involved in the government of a country like this," he says. "Do you have - like - a home to go back to?"

Hbomb blinks. "Is it that obvious I'm not a native?"

“Hbomb, I’ve been in this country for 2 months. I think I know what a foreign accent sounds like around here, and you are most *definitely* foreign.”

Or maybe he’s part of some small ethnic group Ranboo’s not aware of. But the chances of that, considering all of Hbomb’s other tendencies, seem unlikely.

Hbomb shrugs. “Well - yeah, I guess. It *is* kind of weird how Tubbo and Fundy both manage to still remain President and Vice after all this time.”

He’s dodging the question. “So how did *you* get involved?” Ranboo asks again.

Hbomb gives him a smile, small and thin, but almost proud. Almost like the way his mother would when she saw his achievements at school or in tournaments.

“I have - not an explorer’s heart-” he pauses, looking thoughtful. “No, I think it’s more the people. I want to meet different people from different places, so that’s what I left home to do. It was pure coincidence I was in L’Manberg back when the first revolution started. I was actually hired into Wilbur’s army, and made enough connections that I decided to stick around for a while. Wanted to see how Wilbur would build the new country, I guess. There’s this - this sense of excitement, ya know? In being part of something so new.”

His smile falls slightly. “You know how that worked out.”

Ranboo hums. “Yeah. And?”

“When Schlatt was in power, I left the city to travel other parts of New L’Manberg - well, the country was called Manberg back then. When I got word of the rebellion in Pogtopia, I came back to see if I wanted to join. I’d made friends with Wilbur and Tubbo back during the revolution, and I knew Tommy a little too, so it didn’t take much convincing for me to join up again.”

Hbomb leans back, looking down. “Of course, rebellions don’t spend their time actually battling too much. I did a few reconnaissance missions here or there, lobbed a few explosives, a few assassinations or supply gathering missions. Survived the wither attack and explosions by not being in L’Manberg - I mean, I was Tubbo’s friend, but I wasn’t too eager to throw myself into the final battle, you know? Around that time I was thinking of packing up and leaving, until Tubbo reached out to me asking if I could run a few messages between L’Manberg and New L’Manberg’s other provinces.”

Which is, presumably, why Hbomb had been picked to retrieve Ranboo during the kidnapping plot. That decision is beginning to make a bit more sense, with the context that Hbomb is one of the few people Tubbo trusts who also knows both the lay of the land and has a clear head for executing operations.

“And... the SMP?” Ranboo asks. The SMP and its mysterious ruler, Dream, has been a source of both headache and endless fascination for him. The increased military presence on the border and occasional violent skirmish hasn’t exactly been erasing Tubbo’s gray hairs either.

Hbomb shrugs, leaning against the armrest. "I sound foreign, but I don't sound like I'm from New L'Manberg. It's pretty easy to pass me off as a merchant or simple traveler, and the SMP has a lot of those. So mostly I scout army activity, rumors, stuff like that, and report back to Tubbo. My language skills come in handy here."

Ranboo nods, but he still couldn't wrap his head around how Hbomb willingly stays around this place. Even with his improving friendship with Tubbo, L'Manberg is decidedly about the worst place he's ever been. There's every reason for him to leave, and for Hbomb to have that opportunity and just not take it...

Some people just value their relationships differently, he decides. He can't understand Tubbo's decision to remain president and guide this miserable country of miserable people towards a light that might not even exist either.

"Well. Glad it's worked out for you so far," Ranboo says.

Hbomb nods. "Like I said, might pack up soon though. Not forever, but Tubbo's been able to hold down fort a bit better lately."

"That should be nice."

"Of course, of course. I do miss them - my friends and family back in my town."

"What country is that even in?" Ranboo asks. "You sound, like - not from here. But I don't recognize it."

Which is an oddity for him, as Hypixel is a major trading hub along the west coast of their continent, just like L'Manberg once was. Ranboo's used to identifying nationalities.

Hbomb laughs. "It's a small place on the coast of Novixl. Own language and everything. We're surrounded by mountains, so no nations have come to conquer us under their territory yet."

The western continent, across the ocean. Ranboo knows some people back in Hypixel have made the journey.

"Aren't you worried?" Ranboo asks.

Hbomb shrugs. "Not really. If you know what you're doing, when to set sail, then it's not that hard. Life on the sea is never truly safe, though. Just a fact I've gotten used to."

*Life on land isn't much safer,* Ranboo thinks. At least in his experience.

"Okay," he says aloud. "Uh - guess I should wish you luck?"

Hbomb laughs again. "Yeah. I'd like some of that, but you might want to save some for yourself."

Ranboo can't exactly disagree.



~\*~

His blade clatters down in a curtain of dust.

“Nice,” Ranboo says, kneeling down to reinstate his grip on the handle.

Fundy nods tersely, his own sword held tight against his chest.

“You moved too fast,” he says. “Mistimed that attack. That’s how I was able to unarm you.”

Ranboo nods, almost absentminded, feeling the light weight of his sword swinging back around his wrist again. He twirls it once, twice, like a gleaming parasol.

“I’ve never seen that method of disarming before,” he says. “With-” he tried to copy what he remembers of Fundy’s movements, slowly, slicing his blade out smooth through an invisible target.

“Less tension in your shoulder,” Fundy says, eyes trained on the movement. “You need to build that swing speed too.”

Ranboo shrugs, lowering his sword again.

“Where’d you learn it?” he asks.

Fundy blinks. “The war. We all developed our own little techniques.” He kicks at the dusty ground. Ranboo wonders if he ever worries about the constant stains in his dress shirts; probably not.

“Oh. So - no one taught you? Not even...”

“Wilbur was shit at fighting,” Fundy says flatly. He drops his arm, lets his sword hang loosely.

“Oh.” Wind has obscured Ranboo’s vision with his hair. He brushes some of it back aside, thinking he needs a haircut soon. “That’s - everyone talks about his words, don’t they?”

Fundy’s lips curl into some grim approximation of a smile. “You could say that, yes. Pretty Wilbur with his pretty words.”

“He’s your father, wasn’t he?”

“Maybe.” Fundy unbuttons the top of his longcoat, despite the increasing chill. “He could swing a sword if he needed to, I guess, but he always hated physical battle.”

Ranboo watches as Fundy stalks a semi-circle around him in the courtyard. More gray dust billows around his boots. “Not that he needed to be good or anything,” Fundy continues. “Being the leader meant staying out of the action as much as you could.”

Because the rebellion couldn’t afford a sudden leadership crisis. Right - Ranboo’s heard this part before. It’s why Tubbo employs so much security, why he was guaranteed food and

shelter over the common citizen in the very early days of New L'Manberg.

"You're kind of shit at fighting too," Fundy suddenly says.

Ranboo opens his mouth to protest, but Fundy elaborates first.

"Your moves are flashy and fast, and they look good. But they'll only work if your opponent operates by the same rules." Fundy glances him up and down again, like a curious dilemma. "I bet you were good in the tournaments."

"I was better than the average noble," Ranboo shrugs.

"Right. And I bet those skills would have gotten you a lot further than you would have gone otherwise, especially given your hybrid status. But that doesn't mean you-" Fundy sheaths his sword with a near silent flash. "If you were thrown into a battlefield right now, you might survive - but it would be more due to luck than anything else."

"Everyone survives by luck in war," Ranboo says, holding back the irritation in his tone.

"Yeah, maybe. The original L'Manberg cabinet got through by trying to avoid the action." Fundy takes a step back. "Y'know, I've heard rumors about Hbomb's latest destination."

Ranboo can't help the slight bristle in his next word. "And?"

Fundy shakes his head. "It's not any of my business, is it? We can hardly fault people for trying their best to survive."

Ranboo watches without movement as Fundy turns and heads for the door back inside. The few patches of stringy grass in the courtyard remain absolutely still. Somewhere overheard, a songbird begins to quietly sing.

~\*~

"I'd never seen a map like this before coming here," Ranboo admits.

The quill stills in Tubbo's hand. Ranboo watches him blink, turn his gaze across the room to the enormous map that spans an entire wall.

Tubbo's room is far more sparsely populated than Ranboo's. It has a desk, a bed, and two large drawers containing enough dry legal codes and budget calculations to make anyone fall asleep for a year. Everything here is gray and muted, a painting with all the colors bleached out.

The blanket's aren't folded, but they barely look used either. No one goes in here besides Tubbo, and more recently, Ranboo. There are few personal effects.

It doesn't feel like a room. It feels like an extension of Tubbo's office, where he slaves away at New L'Manberg's problems all day long.

Another moment passes before Tubbo finally sighs, lets his quill fall down, and removes himself from that chair he seems so attached to. Ranboo hides a smile as he puts a hand to the map.

“What other map would you see?” Tubbo asks, moving to his side. They study the map - the map of the Pyserne, the continent of New L’Manberg, Hypixel, the SMP - the continent they’ve lived on their entire lives.

“Well,” Ranboo says, “this map’s upside-down.”

Tubbo gives him a strange look. “It’s not.”

“Hypixel should be at the top,” Ranboo says.

“Hypixel is a southern island.”

“Yeah, and the top part of a map should be the south.”

“That’s-” Tubbo shakes his head. “That’s ridiculous. The compass is right there, see?” He points to said compass drawing, clearing denoting “N” at the topmost point.

“That compass is upside-down too.”

Tubbo sighs. “I don’t care if you Hypixelise think you’re on top of everyone, but the *rest* of the world uses a system where the *North* of the map *faces North*.

“They face the North pole,” Ranboo says. “Which is on the bottom of a map.”

“That’s - stupid!”

“You just don’t want to admit you’re wrong.”

Ranboo quite enjoys the quietly heated look on Tubbo’s face. It’s not often people can rile him up nowadays.

“I - no, *you’re* wrong. *Wrong.* ”

“I’m not.”

Tubbo sighs, flopping onto another chair. “I don’t have the energy for this. Can we just agree to disagree?”

“We can agree that the other person’s wrong, yes.”

Ranboo’s given a snort in reply.

Of course, Tubbo *is* wrong. The South is the top of the world - thus it should be on the top of a map. He has no clue how they’ve convinced themselves otherwise.

“You know,” Tubbo says suddenly. “I heard that in the western continents, there are people who draw their maps with the North pole to the *left.* ”

A pause. “Now that’s *really* stupid.”

“I know, right?”

~\*~

The ship is a large and yawning thing, rolling gently beside the stone harbor. It’s among the three Ranboo had been offered by the nation to name - some tradition for newlywed upper classes that long predates even the Dream SMP’s takeover of this area a century back.

*Sunchaser* now paints itself into the ship’s identity; in its golden hull, its brilliant banner of a rising sun. Several ships of the Sparklez Kingdom linger further out in the sea. They’re loaded already though, merchants and goods and more than a few cannons installed on the sides.

“Glides real fast, this one,” Hbomb says. He reaches the end of the ramp and makes the final leap onto deck. A hard *thunk* as he lands, and then he offers a hand out.

Ranboo grips the hand tightly and is helped onto the deck as well, with only minimal impact into his legs. He straightens and glances around, squinting against the rare blooms of dawn sunlight just beginning to peak over New L’Manberg’s distant hills, a few chilly miles behind the beach harbor.

“That’s good,” he says. “The less time we spend on the water, the better.”

Hbomb shrugs, and Ranboo realizes the man’s probably more than used to a life at sea. He certainly seems to like the sailor’s life, and the boat ride down the river to this beach had also drawn out more than a few casual swears from him that the broken formality of New L’Manberg had seemingly stifled.

Upon noticing Hbomb is now paying more attention to the crew getting their sails and riggings ready, Ranboo decides to move further onto the deck. He ends up at the opposite side of the ship, facing the timeless ocean before them, the morning waters oddly serene.

They say sailors were the first to realize their world is round, because they saw every day how ships sailing into the horizon disappeared from sight bottom-first.

That’s what encouraged the first sailors to go beyond the sea, further and further, until they encountered different ships with different people from an entirely different continent. That was nearly two thousand years ago.

Ranboo swings an arm idly over the railing, even as *Sunchaser* begins to turn and cut a slow, rippling path through the water.

He and Tubbo had said their short goodbyes yesterday. They have a letter system set up now, to be delivered by specific trade ships that double as messengers. They don’t plan to see each other again soon.

A longer goodbye had been said to Enderchest and JJJeffery, the latter of whom refused to go near the ocean and the former of whom refused to leave the latter.

The sunrise is behind them. From his view of the ocean sprawling west, Ranboo sees little of it but frays of golden light. But he feels the warmth all the same.

The moon is still hovering just above the horizon, its shape round, reflection stretched thin. They say strange things happen out on the water. They say that the ocean is older than the land. It's a thing of the Overworld, the defining feature of a dimension Ranboo has had chosen for him.

Sometimes he wonders what would happen if he finds his way to the End. If he might feel more accepted; if he might be more free of his responsibilities. He used to dream of it when he was younger.

He's long grown past those dreams.

After a while, all land fades from view. The moon's reflection wanes its last goodbyes over the golden waters before fading entirely. The sun shines its brilliant glory over the newly dawned morning.

*Sunchaser*, heading for the western continent, is accompanied by a small fleet of other vessels. They're all a few tiny dots in a seemingly infinite vastness.

They say strange things happen out at sea. Ranboo thinks that the statement is true, but doesn't tell the whole story.

Strange things happen in New L'Manberg as well. Strange things happen in Hypixel. Strange things happen in the End.

The world is full of strange things he will never have control over.

But. Nonetheless, strange things happen out at sea.

"Enjoying the view?"

Ranboo turns his head to stare into the spiraling purple-gold eyes of Karl Jacobs.

"It's only water," Ranboo says.

"A lot of water," Karl Jacobs says. "A puddle is nothing awe-inspiring, but the ocean? It's like one man compared to the largest army in the world."

"I suppose."

Karl Jacobs looks amused. "It's like one pinch of ash against a volcano. One dark cloud against a thunderstorm that lasts for days."

"Like an underground pool of lava against the Nether oceans," Ranboo says, sliding his chin down to rest against the warm railing. "I get it."

The sight of the ocean is nothing new to him, however, even if this is only the second time he's properly on a voyage across it.

Karl Jacobs nods. A thoughtful look crosses his face.

“What year is it?” he asks.

“You don’t know that?”

“I don’t know a lot of things.”

“You don’t sound like it.”

“What does that have to do with the truth?”

Ranboo resists the urge to throw something at him. “The year’s 1691.”

“Huh. Cool.” Karl Jacobs rests an arm against the railing again. He looks faintly interested in the smooth wood grain. “That was quick.”

“What was-” and then he remembers their first conversation. *Perseverance*, or whatever it was about. “I guess. It’s not forever though.”

“Of course not. Nothing’s forever, and nothings guaranteed.” Karl Jacobs pauses. “I imagine New L’Manberg might be more pleasant once you come back.”

“You imagine?”

“Nothing’s guaranteed,” Karl Jacobs repeats.

Ranboo can’t help a tiny sigh. “Fair enough. But at least I’m here now.” He pauses, and then adds in a quieter voice, “Even if I didn’t do all that much.”

“You survived,” Karl Jacobs says. “That’s the important part. And from the look of it, without much injury.”

Ranboo hums. “You could say that.”

“I’m glad about that. You didn’t deserve what you were put through.”

“It could have been way worse.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” But that’s a rhetorical question. Somehow, Karl Jacobs *does* know.

“I’ve seen it,” he says.

Ranboo could play along, but there’s no point denying that this guy is both an utter weirdo and somehow has an ability to show up where he shouldn’t be able to.

“What’s it like?” he asks instead. “Where - in the places where things are a lot worse for me.”

Karl Jacobs smiles thinly. "Well, I will say this is one of the more pleasant lives you could be living."

"Cool. That's great." Whatever he means by that. A number of things, probably, but - Ranboo decides that's the extent of his curiosity on that topic for today. Something - maybe that part of him which glides the thin line between worlds - tells him that he might be driven just a little bit mad if he tries to poke it further.

"Alright, then," he says. "So what are *you* doing here today?"

Karl Jacobs shrugs. "I'm not really sure. Probably to talk to you. Maybe to talk to Hbomb."

"Does Hbomb know you?"

"He knows a lot more people than anyone else thinks, Ranboo."

"So when are you leaving?" Karl Jacobs was certainly not on the list of approved passengers or crew for this voyage. He was certainly not on when they first set sail. It means he probably arrived through less than normal means.

"I have no clue."

Ranboo whistles. "That sucks, man."

"I know."

"Seems to me you could use some of that 'pleasant life' you say I'm in."

Karl Jacobs full on laughs, right then. It suddenly strikes Ranboo that, though he's only talked with the utterly bizarre man one other time, that *this* Karl Jacobs feels almost entirely different from the person he had encountered back in the White House. There's an air of finality around him that wasn't there before, like he's fully prepared to sail into the unknown and never come back.

"I think the tale of Karl Jacobs is something best left for another day," he says. "The next sunrise, you might say."

"No, actually. Who says that?"

"Oh. Well, I guess it's just me then."

"You do you. As long as you survive, right? Or some shit like that."

Karl gives him another weird look. "You know, I still can't get over that."

"Get over what?"

"You swearing. Like a lot."

"I grew up in *Hypixel*."

“Yeah - I guess.”

Weirdo indeed. But none of Ranboo’s business.

“Well, I-” Karl Jacobs frowns. “Excuse me.”

He takes a step back, out of sight. When Ranboo then turns around, he sees only an empty space on deck.

“Huh,” he says.

He hopes Karl Jacobs survives whatever comes next for him.

Then another splay of warmth pours over his shoulders. An albatross squalls above, its shadow passing over. A quick glance up reveals that the cloud which had been briefly covering the sun has now been blown aside. The ocean glitters in its endless reflection.

Ranboo straightens up, deciding to head for the mess hall. It’s about time for breakfast.

## Chapter End Notes

alright yes i know scenes are missing assume they happened anyway. the goal with this is to give a different perspective to what ranboo underwent and im too tired to write scenes that aren’t really necessary.

also what if i told you guys the planet this au takes place in actually spins sideways and the magnetic poles are on the left and right sides of the world

but like in the vast infinity of space what even is the difference between up and down. you could put the south pole on the top in a chart of the solar system and it would be just as valid

also FINALLY this fic is done! its kind of a mess and there were so many delays. thanks to everyone who’s read this far, left kudos, commented, ect. ive promised it forever and worked on it forever and im glad i got to finish it.

since ive gotten quite a few questions about it - yes, you guys can make fanart, fanfic, podfic, translations, any other fanworks of my stuff. just give credit to me and the fic/fics it was inspired by, preferably with ao3’s inspired by feature if it’s another post on this site. printing things out as an actual book is also fine, as long as it’s only for personal use

okay bye it’s finally time i work on hide behind my curtains



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